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THE TALL VILLA

BY

LUCAS MALET

(MARY ST. LEGER HARRISON)

AUTHOR OF "HISTORY OF SIR RICHARD CALMADY,"
"THE GOLDEN GALLEON," "DAMARIS,"
"THE SCORE," ETC., ETC.

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THE TALL VILLA

CHAPTER I

"AND there is always the Tall Villa," Frances Copley said, in her quiet, well-bred, slightly husky voice.

As she spoke she dropped the stump of a half-smoked cigarette into her finger-bowl and looked at her husband across the dinner table. It was the first time she had looked at him during his surprising confession.

That confession, though embracing wide issues, had not occupied long because the statements it contained were simple, self-evident, incontrovertible. Nobody in his, or her, sober senses would make such admissions unless they were starkly true; and that Morris was in full possession of his senses his wife did not for one instant doubt. She listened in silence save for a brief enquiry, now and then, to convince herself just in how far this financial failure need not be, or must be considered

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fraudulent. Her mind meanwhile worked with unaccustomed clearness and rapidity.

It was her habit to surround herself with beautiful things. To do so appeared to her reasonable and right. The appointments of the room and dinner-table bore witness alike to her graceful taste and her power of spending. She loved half-lights, soft subtle colours, exquisite surfaces and textures. By the employment of these she sought instinctively to veil the too frequent crudity of life. Her attitude of mind found fitting expression in the collection of modern French and Flemish paintings with which the walls of the room were hung. The pensive subdued tones of river, or canal wharf, and the shipping lying alongside of it; of crooked, rainwashed streets and alleys, in some obscure provincial city; of lonely country houses, whose curtained-lamp-litten windows spoke of intimate secret histories enacted within; of stretches of barren wind-swept sand dunes fronting a northern sea—in all these, suggestion rather than affirmation appealed to her, the underlying drama being that of expectation or of regret.

Such was the habitual attitude of her mind. But in her new-found activity and clarity of perception, Frances Copley understood that

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the day of veils and half-lights was over. Now and henceforward she was, as she believed, up against crudities of a most rampant sort. For all these beautiful and costly things, with which she had screened herself from coarse reality, were doomed to dispersion. They must go, were already gone in point of fact, if honour were to be satisfied. And, with her, honour indubitably ranked paramount. Nothing remained save her girlhood's possession and the fortune—including some London house property—she had inherited from her mother, Lady Laura Winslow, née Cowden, the elder daughter of the late, and sister of the present, Lord Bulparc.

To the large majority of women—gentle as well as simple—a clear twelve hundred a year spells comfort if not actual luxury. But all wealth is relative; and to Frances Copley such an income seemed despicable save as pocket money and, with economy, a modest dress allowance. She beheld herself beggared. Yet, even in her first flush of astonishment, she was sensible neither of anger nor of alarm. She only felt interested, profoundly interested, unusually and consciously alive. For the game, which heretofore, throughout her whole married life, had been rather conspicu-

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ously in her husband's hands, now, suddenly, unexpectedly, was transferred to her own.

Thanks to abounding vitality—which goes so far as to engender and maintain success—to his good looks and to a certain dazzlingly plausible way he had with him, Morris Copley, though less well-bred and well-connected, eclipsed and dominated his wife. Tacitly she consented to be passive, ineffectual. If her baby had lived all might have been different, for the young man possessed a large bump of philoprogenitiveness. As mother of his children, Frances would have scored. But without a baby in her arms, let alone a well-peopled nursery, she became a poor second—though he was very fairly faithful and genuinely fond of her—to the excitements of business, to the sport and passion of making money which, let it in all fairness be added, he held her free very lavishly to spend.

But financial failure once confessed, not impossible bankruptcy staring the two thus sternly in the face, the positions were in great measure reversed. Frances Copley held the cards; and, with an initiative and lucidity startling to herself, she proceeded to play them. Therefore she said:

"And there is always the Tall Villa."

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The young man tried to force a laugh. He was strained, tired, cruelly on edge, and confession to his wife capped the climax. . . . She had really been as good as gold, he owned, wonderfully calm and restrained. But this attempted pleasantry—for such he took it to be—jarred on him. It was tactless, out of place.

"Which you have always condemned as the most preposterous piece of domestic architecture in existence, my dear Fan—a supreme example of how 'not to do it,' wherein only the workhouse as immediate alternative would ever make a civilised being consent to live!"

Mrs. Copley looked down at the cigarette end, floating ungainly and abject in the finger-bowl—emblematic, as it seemed, of the crudities henceforth confronting her.

"Well, from what you tell me mayn't I reasonably gather it comes within measurable distance of that, Morry—the workhouse as immediate alternative, I mean?"

"In mercy don't take things too hard," he said. Throughout the past intolerable half-hour, this was the first direct cut she had given him and he winced under it. "Don't be bitter, or you will make me too unutterably miserable. I shall smash up, and nothing is

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to be gained by my smashing up. I frankly own I acted like a fool; but the opportunity was unique. Not one man in ten thousand—knowing all I knew and standing where I stood—would have had the coolness to refuse and resist. Coolness or funk—for really it would have looked more like cowardice than judgment to call off or back out. You can't appreciate the circumstances because I can't put them before you in sequence and in detail. They are too complicated to explain off-hand or for you to grasp. So I am reduced to stating the net result, which, on the face of it, condemns me more heavily than I deserve. . . . But all that is beside the mark at this moment. I don't care a hang about myself——"

His voice shook. His fair, handsome face was haggard. His blue-grey eyes—too arrestingly clear and frank, so the wicked said, Lord Bulparc among them, for perfect good faith—looked dim and bruised.

"I might go under for a time, but I should pull round right enough. . . . You, your position, all you stand to lose through my fault, is what really matters, what I really care about. The thought of all I have brought upon you turns me sick, Fan, deathly sick."

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"Oh! nonsense, nonsense, Morry!" Frances interrupted.

She was touched. For evidently he suffered on her account—not as much as he imagined probably, yet enough to call forth generous response on her part.

"You have the gambler's soul; but that is no new discovery to me. I reckoned with it long ago—sympathetically, for I am not so very sure I haven't something of the gambler's soul myself."

"You?—my dear Fan!" he protested, as brushing aside a manifest absurdity.

"Yes, I," she said, with a certain eagerness. "And then, quite independent of the excitement and sport of taking big risks, you honestly believed you were going to bring off a grand *coup*. I am not stupid. I do understand, and I don't blame you in the least."

Frances talked fast, giving him time to recover himself; for she shrank from being too much touched. Her marriage was an old story, its hours of ecstasy and enthusiasm—in as far as they had ever existed—well over. She had no wish to revive them, or rather the semblance of them.

"The question is how we can best meet the situation here, at home, in my department.

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It is impossible to go on living in this house and keeping our present set of servants. They are our masters, not we theirs, and they would make retrenchment impossible. You and I are not precisely unworldly, I am afraid; but we are unsophisticated as the flowers of the field compared with my maid Norris, your man Temperly, and the great Mrs. Peake. No—if I am to solve my side of the problem we must make a clean sweep of our existing establishment. And then really and truly, Morris, for a time at least, the tall villa, I think. You see, I had it and all its furniture done up last year, for the tenant who wriggled at the last moment, as tenants mostly do—plague them—and left me in the lurch."

She smiled very charmingly at him as she finished speaking—curiously animated, yet softened. Notwithstanding the fine dignities of a gown of cloth of silver swathed in black net, the diamond tiara crowning her light brown hair, the diamond dog-collar clasping her long delicate throat, Frances Copley looked extraordinarily young. . . . Younger, so it occurred to her husband, than he had ever seen her since the poor baby's death; since, indeed, the prospect of the poor baby's

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impending advent was first notified. She had stepped back into the innocent grace and eagerness of girlhood. Whether Morris Copley found comfort and relief in this transformation, or whether it merely occupied his quick observant mind to the exclusion of other subjects it would be difficult to determine. In any case it afforded an excuse for closing the conversation, of which he was not slow to avail himself.

He got up from his place at the head of the table, came round to her and, bending down, kissed the little curls on the nape of her neck.

"You are astonishing, Fan," he said, "and admirable. Far from being downed by it, I could almost swear you enjoyed this fiasco."

Frances laughed, flushed slightly, and, standing up, pushed him gently away from her.

"Don't untidy my hair, please," she said. "I want to look my smartest. And now come. We are going to the opera just the same—just as if nothing had happened. I can't desert Lucia FitzGibbon, and, as it is, we are late. Bluff?—no, my dear, just—just—well—breeding, which obliges us both, very literally, to-night to face the music."

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In this high humour Frances Copley continued, carrying all before her with serene yet unswerving persistence, until migration from the house in Grosvenor Square, to the house on the confines of Primrose Hill was duly accomplished. The world gossiped, condoled and pitied, with that secret licking of the lips over the misfortunes of others common to civilised humanity. Relations spoke their minds with the unrestricted rudeness licensed by family affection. Yet Frances remained steadfast. Elements hitherto latent in her nature were aroused, and with a certain questing alacrity she obeyed their impulsion. They pushed her towards the tall villa—so formerly called by her in derision—and to the tall villa she went.

Its tallness, it may be added, was deceptive, a matter more of appearance than of fact. Built in the late twenties of the last century by a none too discriminating disciple of John Nash, it stood at the end of, and detached from, a long curved terrace of white houses, some of which, at the date of the Copleys' migration, were already in process of demolition with a view to the erection of blocks of modern flats. It consisted of basement and ground floor, with only three stories above;

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but the loftiness of the lower rooms and the unusual height of their narrow windows—four abreast both on the front and side elevation—produced, vertically, an oddly elongated effect. The whole building might have been pulled up by the shoulders so as to gain a more extended view—over the heads of the elms and chestnuts shading the banks of the canal on the opposite side of the rather ill-kept roadway—of the pleasant green outstretch of the park beyond. This effect of elongation was increased by fluted pilasters running up between the windows, the whole height of the walls, to the decorated cornice supporting the pediment which masked a slope of slated roof.

The house was set back from the main road by the width of a square garden, enclosed by dwarf walls topped by close-set wrought-iron railings, above which showed the spikes and spires of an unclipped privet hedge. The iron gates of the garden faced on to the side street. Entering them a paved way led to the pillared portico, placed—by some freak of design on the part of the architect—not in the centre but at the far side of the façade and opening at right angles to it. To reach the front door you must walk round the corner of the house

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and cross the garden under the dining-room windows—a notably awkward arrangement. The three steps, giving access to the portico, were guarded to right and left by a pair of lions—wholly unfearful animals, carved in Bath stone, which had weathered badly, with soot-pitted manes and foolish bubbly faces. Each stood on three legs, looking sideways towards his fellow, while holding aloft one forepaw as though roguishly in act to throw the grimy stone ball inseparably adherent to its awkwardly distended claws.

Portico, dwarf wall, and tall-seeming house, were alike painted a faintly greyish white. In respect of colouring and of their pretentious yet tentative elegance, exterior and interior were well-matched. Plaster mouldings, garlands, medallions, in profusion, adorned the living-rooms, hall and staircase, rendering all hanging of pictures and ornaments difficult and that of wall-papers impossible. This resulted in a general starkness and unclothedness of aspect very foreign to comfort, given the many vagaries of the London climate. For the windows were too many, in foul weather, to oppose sufficient barrier to the melancholy reigning without; while, in fair weather, they admitted such excess of light

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as endangered all nice sense of privacy and repose.

It was of this last—imagined lack of privacy—Frances Copley became specially conscious during the initial period of her sojourn. The move had taken place early in an unusually fine and cloudless summer; and this intrusive, enquiring daylight left no corner of the lofty rectangular rooms unvisited, seeming to ravish all secrecy, outwit every attempted retreat, from sunrise to sunset.

She had a singular suspicion, too, of never being quite alone, though in point of fact she had never passed so many solitary hours. Morris went daily to the City, drawn thither not only by the exigencies of past disaster but by multiple schemes of reconstruction and fresh venture seething in his rather perilously fertile brain.

His present abode represented to him no more than a lair to sleep in, eat in night and morning, and escape from as early and for as long, as business and other interests any way permitted. He did not want to be unkind to his wife or neglect her; but his opinion of the place was unmodified. As a house it was simply unspeakable; and, in the back of his mind, he nursed a little grudge against her for her

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apparent resignation to its geographical and innumerable other disabilities. That word of hers, in the moment of catastrophe, about "breeding" which compels you to "face the music," rankled. For was it breeding, or defective sensibility, which dictated her persistent serenity? He would have liked to believe the latter; since the former seemed to set her annoyingly above him, both in the social and moral scale.

Visitors, meanwhile—as he did not fail to note—were few and far between. All Frances Copley's world had been loud in assurance that, "of course it couldn't make the faintest possible difference to them"—the speakers individually or collectively—"where she lived, dear thing. They counted on seeing every bit as much of her as ever, notwithstanding the distance, which was just—well, you know—a little appalling!" But as the weeks went by distance proved longer and memories shorter than even Frances herself quite anticipated. In the rush of an exceptionally brilliant season what could you, after all though, expect? The world just then is hardly in pilgrimage humour; and from all the habitable parts of London—as her world counted habitableness

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—very much of a pilgrimage to the tall villa it unquestionably was! Thus she reasoned, finding excuses for a desertion she refused to resent. While—as she added for her own further convincing—even if people had given livelier proofs of faithfulness, she would have been embarrassed to return their civilities. For had not motor-car and carriage-horses, alike, vanished in the wake of the aristocracy downstairs—of Miss Norris, Mr. Temperly and the great Mrs. Peake, of Copley's hunters, polo ponies and their attendant *personnel,* of his English gamekeepers, Scotch gillies and all the rest of the gold-washed set out; so that there really remained to her as means of locomotion, only bus, underground, the elusive taxi, or her own slender, high-instepped feet?

Yet Frances Copley could not call herself unhappy. She felt no more anger and alarm at the changed conditions of her life to-day than when her husband first confessed his failure. She still was interested, and that with a widening, deepening interest. Ever since she left the schoolroom, she had been—as she now saw it—mercilessly clamped to the social wheel; which turned and turned till she grew too dizzy with its countless revolutions to realise herself, realise that—deep down in

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her—she actually was wanted, loved. Her marriage to Morris, his dazzling plausibility, the great wealth and buying power he represented, all belonged to that same matter of the wheel; and, in so far, stultified rather than developed her. But the tall villa, now she came fairly to dwell within its slightly ridiculous portals, through its isolation, not to say its ostracism, freed her effectively if somewhat ironically from the wheel.

It gave her breathing space, gave her that heretofore unknown quantity, leisure, and the accessibility to impressions which, in persons of temperament, leisure confers. She felt delicately alive, delicately aware in every nerve, at every point. She had time in which to study the subtle, introspective modern music, read the fine drawn modern criticisms, savour the gracefully unemphatic modern minor poets, French and English, who tend to stimulate a refined intelligence while setting any grossness of the senses delightfully apart. All this residence of the tall villa—or was it actually the tall villa itself?—did for her. And before long she came to imagine it did, or very shortly could and would do, very much more than merely this.

For just as its tallness was a fake and an

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illusion, so was its extreme candour of daylight. It pretended, using all means in its power slyly to take her in and throw her off the scent. And this from shyness, from a suspicion she might misinterpret, scoff at, or attempt contemptuously to expose it, rather than out of malignity or any spiteful intent. With increasing frequency Frances caught herself thinking that these lofty rooms, with their affectation and faded self-conscious elegance, had things of considerable moment to impart could they be sufficiently assured of her sympathy to dare speak out.

More especially was she aware of this impression in the drawing-room, and upon the gallery of the staircase immediately without. She noted it as peculiarly present at recurrent intervals of, say, a week, at and after about five o'clock. Sometimes for two or three evenings together she would be conscious of a push, of a stealthy effort around her—though whether in the direction of sound or of sight, of words trying to make themselves heard or forms trying to make themselves visible, she could not detect.

The effect upon her was pleasurable in its novelty and phantasy, if a little anxious and nervous. She played with it, delicately in-

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trigued and alert. But impressions are not static. It is of their essence that they wax or wane. With Frances Copley the lighter, the merely playful phase, passed. Interest deepened. A sense of the importance—to her and for her—of the whole queer matter, deepened also. Gradually, to herself almost imperceptibly, she embraced opportunity, cultivated it; not only offered it hospitality but began gently to pursue and to invite. At first without success. For the entrance of a maid upon an errand, the somewhat ebullient return of her husband from the City, some noise hailing from the canal, the road or side-street, or sounds, primitive, singularly arresting and exotic—cry of strange birds or caged beasts—reaching her faintly through open windows when the wind drew from the east, would obliterate the effort, annihilate the push, thus breaking up the almost established contact between her intelligence, her senses, and whatever strove to reach her. Then the pretended candour, the shy disarming pretentiousness, of the house, came back in their fulness; while, with a movement of rather poignant disappointment, Frances knew that, for to-day at all events, all chance of discovery was lost.

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CHAPTER II

BUT delays and frustrations notwithstanding, the event did finally declare itself.

One evening of the first week in July, Morris Copley returned from the City in his sunniest and, it must be added, most attractive humour. His spirits were high. His looks betrayed a suggestion of agreeable excitement. His manner was unwontedly affectionate. After dinner he went upstairs with his wife into the drawing-room and sat there contentedly with her in the gilded post-sunset clearness, which indefinitely lingered on as though unwilling to give place to any real darkness of night. He chattered amusingly, gaily, as he had throughout dinner. Yet Frances detected a certain absent-mindedness in his talk. He did not come to the point, hesitated to do so, and she definitely apprehended a point. Then at last——

"Upon my word, I begin to believe you were right in moving here, Fan," he said. "In some ways, at least."

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"Of course I was right," she answered. His happy temper was infectious. His display of affection exhilarating—even if it did not go very deep. "But I enjoy hearing you acknowledge that. It is a pretty tribute to my perspicacity. You made sure I should repent. Now you pay me the excellent compliment of seeing I've nothing of which to repent."

Gently, in loverlike fashion, sitting on the arm of her chair, Morris pinched her cheek.

"Oh, don't be too sure of that," he returned. "The day of repentance, I grant you, doesn't seem to have dawned yet, but it may come along nevertheless. If you outrage the conventions, sooner or later they're bound to take thier revenge on you!—All the same, I own, you have transmogrified the inside of this house beyond my wildest hopes or expectations. The rooms are growing very livable. They have a certain *cachet*—and they suit you. I happened to run across Lucia FitzGibbon this morning, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, of all places on earth. She'd been to see her lawyers—as I had mine,"—he paused, his thoughts going apparently, for the moment, quite otherwhere.—"And—ah! yes, I remember—she expended herself in

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praise of your cleverness,—she declared you'd made this preposterous perching place quite lovely and that you looked lovely in it. Only, she said, the whole struck her as a trifle unreal and fantastic, its feet off the floor, so to speak. To be quite honest, what she said worried me a little, Fan. She declared you were wasting, growing altogether too thin—diaphanous was her expression—and that all the time you seemed listening to and watching for things which weren't there, which didn't exist in fact."

Frances Copley felt her breath catch. This came so distractingly near the truth which yet, to her thinking, supremely wasn't the truth.

"Oh, rubbish, my dear Morry, rubbish!" she took him up almost sharply. "We all know how Lucia's imagination runs away with her when once it gets going. If you want a pre-eminent example of seeing what isn't there, you've the finest one possible in Lucia herself. She is a darling and I am fonder of her than all the rest of my Cowden cousins put together; but she is an incorrigible sieve; and a sieve—excuse the mixed metaphor—with a limitless power of romancing."

"All the same I did not relish what she said. I have thought a lot about it since,

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Fan, and this evening I've been taking stock of you. You have grown thinner—a great deal thinner—and I can't account for it. I suppose the sanitation of this house is all right. We did have it tested, didn't we? I wonder if there can be any malaria from the canal."

He got up, and stood resting one hand on her shoulder, looking down into her upturned face.

"See here, my dear child, I think you should consult Plowden. I object to leaving anything to chance, and I'm particularly anxious—for reasons of my own—to avoid complications at this juncture. I should like a definite opinion, a definite assurance—before——"

He broke off, looking away towards the open windows.

"What an infernal row those wolves are making at the Zoo. Do you hear? And what an evilly cruel sound it is. One longs to put a bullet through their heads.—Yes, do send for Plowden, like a good child, just to satisfy me, you know."

"But I don't need a doctor. I am perfectly well." Frances protested. "Plowden is delightful to talk to about music and art.

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But, if you ask for one visit, he gives you a dozen; and I shy at the guinea which sits behind each one of his charming conversations —specially now."

Morris Copley still winced at the mention of money.

"Oh, good heavens, pray don't consider expense," he said with a large impatience. "It's not necessary. I am on the high road to the straightening out of affairs,—and that far sooner and more completely than I expected —the high road which leads bang back to Grosvenor Square, and all Grosvenor Square meant to both of us."

And as Frances found no suitable comment to offer, being surprised out of all readiness of speech, he added—

"Now you will forgive me if I go down to the smoking-room? I expect Charlie Montagu in to talk business."

He lifted his head sharply, almost nervously, catching the distant howls of wolves again, which cut so discordantly across the security of the fair July night.

"Confound the brutes!" he said, as in sudden anger.

Stooping down he gave Frances a perfunctory off-hand, little kiss.

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"I must go,"—and then, like one schooling himself into remembrance of a part, he added —"But be a good dear, and call in old Plowden, won't you, even though he does blow off steam to the tune of a guinea a minute on art? He understands the vagaries of your pretty little body, and I should be so much easier if I knew he was keeping a professional eye on you.—And, for goodness sake, Fan, give up the habit of watching things which aren't there. You're doing it now"——

He passed his open hand back and forth before her face rapidly, as though sweeping aside some vision or vapour.

"It's not wholesome. It's morbid. Pray don't let it grow upon you. I tell you I don't like it. It gives me the creeps."

At that he went, crossing the room and bringing the two *battants* of the high, narrow folding doors together behind him with a little crash as one in haste.

For some minutes Francis remained seated near the open window. She felt perturbed. Morris had shaken her high serenity, carried some fraction of it away with him, indeed, leaving her consciously the poorer by the loss.

He could, when he pleased, be a vastly engaging being. She acknowledged as much.

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But—but—she did not want that particular stop drawn out just now. She wished he wouldn't so please. For he thereby threatened her newly found independence, confused her outlook—lately so concentrated and luminous. And then—though she hesitated to admit it even to herself—she distrusted him in this cajoling humour. For he invariably cajoled, playing upon her affections when, to put it vulgarly, he had something up his sleeve. He had something up his sleeve tonight, or she was reprehensibly mistaken—witness those hints of brilliantly and speedily retrievable fortune, witness, in addition, the announcement of Charlie Montagu's visit to talk business.

She entertained a warm distaste for the said Charlie Montagu—a black-haired, high-coloured bull of a man, bursting with health and money, and always a little overdressed. Before the smash he had paid assiduous court to her, with the object—as she read him—of climbing into society over her back. At the time of the smash, she was bound to allow, he stood by Morris and helped very practically to see him through. But the sense of obligation this induced rendered him only the more repellent. He paid her court as assid-

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uously as heretofore; while, on her part, she read—or fancied she read—in his bold prominent eyes an admiration suggesting payment for his loyalty by a bestowal of favours on her part as abhorrent to her, as it was utterly inconceivable she could ever grant.

The very thought of him stirred up disgust which could only be allayed by movement. So she rose and crossed over to the grand piano—her uncle Lord Bulparc's wedding gift to her.—A beautiful instrument, standing parallel to, and a few feet away from, the inside wall of the room. As central panel of the said wall an oval mirror of uncommon dimensions, framed in elaborate mouldings, reached pretty well from wainscot to cornice. Looking into it, when seated at the key-board, Francis Copley beheld, not only a reflection of her own graceful figure, but the whole room, excepting the double doors leading out onto the staircase gallery, these being in the same plane with it and behind her. On either side the mirror, high on the wall, three-branched sconces held primrose-shaded electric lights.

Frances sat down on the music stool and began playing softly she knew not what. For her mind worked, just now, at two distinct

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levels—the upper and more active one still busy with her just concluded conversation and the questions it raised; the under semi-passive one, with the weaving of delicate harmonies calculated to her vexed spirit.

The appeasing influences thus distilled so gained on her, however, that soon to her surprise—for, in the face of her husband's recent dazzlingly articulate occupation, conditions would have seemed largely unfavourable—she became sensible the room had quite ceased to be shy, to play hide and seek with her. It had begun, indeed, to put forth its effort, its singular and recurrent push. She had not, as she quickly remembered, felt anything of this for nearly a week; and she welcomed it. She went further. In instinctive protest against Morris's shaking of her high serenity, his threatening—whether intentional or not—of her dear independence, she set herself, by a direct effort of will, to meet that effort unreservedly and more than ever encourage that push.

But, just as she warmed to the experiment, a motor swished along the road, and turning up the side street stopped before the iron gates. The door of the car banged, orders were given loudly. A heavy swaggering

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tread passed along the paved way through the garden. The front door bell rang. She heard Morris swing out into the hall to meet his guest. Heard the latter's voice raised in boisterously genial parley. Heard the two go back into the smoking-room together.

Frances controlled her hands, continuing to weave delicate harmonies, yet she could positively have cried with vexation. For surely this showy arrival, these explosive, eminently male and mundane greetings, must fatally break the so nearly established contact, making disappointment, as so often before, her portion. With a desperation of appeal and of invitation, childishly exaggerated had it not been so sincere, so immediate in impulse, she looked round the room, looked at the just sufficiently and piquantly different presentation of it in the mirror beside her.

And after a time—how long she could not judge—it might have been minutes, it might equally have been hours, she quite failed to measure its duration—the response reached her, but in a manner wholly unexpected.

Someone was coming upstairs.—Not one of the maids. The footsteps, though light, were a man's, agile, eager and perhaps a fraction unsteady. Frances did not recognise them.

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Still it must be Morris surely—Morris coming to request her to receive and be civil to his guest, give Charlie Montagu an opportunity, to put it plainly, of unloading his odious cargo of compliment at her feet. This was what he had had up his sleeve then—demand of *rapprochement* between her and Montagu for the sake of possible advancement of business.

Someone paused at the door. Facing round sideways on the music stool, she saw the two handles turn carefully, almost furtively. She prepared to speak and to refuse. She would tell her husband that she was tired, was about to go to her room. For it would be hateful, intolerable, yes absolutely intolerable, to entertain Charlie Montagu—smelling of whisky and cigars—in the interests of some, probably rather shady, financial enterprise to-night!

The two *battants* of the folding doors were thrown back simultaneously by quiet, but evidently forcible, pressure from without.

"Morris!" she began indignantly, and stopped. For no one entered, neither—as craning her graceful neck she looked through the doorway—was anyone standing on the high walled, white painted staircase gallery in the searching brightness of the electric lights.

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The breeding, in which Frances Copley trusted, did not desert her now. After the briefest interval she went on playing—she very much knew not what, discords more than probably, as she afterwards reflected! She was not afraid, had not space nor time to be so, since she felt to balance on a veritable knife-edge of inward and breathless excitement waiting for what should happen next. For though she saw nothing, heard nothing, she knew she was no longer by herself. Knew that what happened next—conviction of this flooding her even as, through these weeks of persistently cloudless summer weather, daylight flooded the pale, lofty, unclothed-seeming rooms of the tall villa—her own tall villa, in which her marriage, her husband, the ever-turning social wheel to which circumstances had so dizzily clamped her, had neither lot nor part—knew, to repeat, that what happened next must be the culmination and climax of her experience, giving the logic of her past, and the direction, for conquest or for submission, of all her coming life.

Someone stood by the piano, against the inward curve of the glistering satin-wood case, facing her. She could see no form.—That effect of luminous vacuity, characteristic

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of the room, alone held the spot. Yet she knew.—And, knowing, asked herself, with fervid interest and expectancy, whether that knowledge, in and by itself, marked the limit of disclosure, was what she waited for, was what happened next in short?

But, as she speculated, on this acutest tiptoe of attention and wonder, the two men came out of the smoking-room into the hall below, their voices raised in expansive freedom of satisfied agreement. Montagu slapped his thigh and laughed.

"Great!" she heard him say. "Great! You have 'em on toast—the enemy's nose prettily pulled, prettily put out of joint.—My congrats! You'll meet Rondbush and the others at my office to-morrow, eleven fifteen sharp? Right you are. So long, my dear chap."

With that, a heavy swaggering tread on the flagged path again, the purring of a motor before the iron gates in the wide street, followed by three aggressive horn-blasts as the car swung round the turning into the road in front.

Frances Copley quivered with resentment and distaste. No civilities would be asked from her in respect of Montagu to-night it was true; nevertheless she felt outraged, soiled

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in her native dignity and refinement by her husband's association with so displeasing a person. She could not forgive the man's vulgarity, his innate commonness. Even less could she forgive his resonant exit which, by breaking up the protective silence had disconnected her, and that violently, from the prodigy which, as she believed, had glimmered at her through the medium of that same preciously protective silence.

Morris, after attending his guest as far as the portico, came back into the hall, slammed the front door behind him and ran up stairs three steps at a time.

"Not gone to bed yet, Fan? That's good," he said.

His fair handsome face was flushed. It glowed. He glowed in manner and movement, fired by the inception of some mighty gamble, some, to him, splendid sport of taking risks. Crossing to the piano, and standing by the inward curve of the glistering satin-wood case, he faced his wife, debonair, dazzling, his shoulders slightly raised, his hands in his trouser pockets, his feet planted well apart.

"We've threshed out our business and to some purpose," he said exultantly. "It's

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hardly too much to prophesy that, with any sort of luck, next spring will see you back in Grosvenor Square on the old terms, or better ones—not inconceivably very much better."

Frances made no response. She was too busy observing him, considering him, in his rich normality. Yes—he was dazzling; yet his words jarred on her. Association with Charlie Montagu did not make for distinction. She asked herself, indeed, if a certain amount of the latter's vulgarity and materialism had sensibly not rubbed off upon Morris, blunting the edge of his perceptions and lowering his general tone.

"Conceivably very much better," he repeated. "Always supposing you consent to my deserting you for five or six months meanwhile."

Then, as she made no response, save that of continued and close observation,—

"Wise woman," he teased her, "not to commit yourself until you've forced me to explain!—Well then, my dear, you may, or probably you mayn't remember hearing me speak of certain South American mining rights I hold. Exactly how, doesn't matter, but somehow Charlie Montagu managed to save them for me in the evil day. They were

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practically worthless at the time, anyhow, owing to a squabble over some delimitation of frontier between the republics of Bolivia and Chile. Now the frontier difficulty is adjusted. We know with which government we have to deal. It remains, therefore, only to get the concession ratified and profits will speedily begin to flow—flow in a silver stream wide and deep. But to do that, firmly and incontestably to establish our claim I mean, it will be necessary to have someone on the spot this autumn and winter with full power to act, and so——"

He broke off, looked behind him sharply, shook himself.

"Ugh!—how abominably cold it strikes in here!" he exclaimed. "What possesses you to sit in a thorough draught, my dear child, doors and windows both open? The place feels like a vault."

As he spoke, Morris moved over and closed the folding doors.

"There—that's better!" he said.

Returning he stopped behind the music-stool, and laid both his hands on his wife's lightly clad shoulders.

"You know you are rather dumb, Fanny—

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almost as cold as this remarkably inclement room of yours. Aren't you glad?"

Frances remained very still, yet her thought raced.

"Really I don't quite know," she said at last; "for your news means nothing less than revolution—if it means anything. And my mind refuses to jump to that without a little preparation. I have made up my face to the existing régime and I don't find it easy to unmake it on the instant.—You are selected to take the journey to this Eldorado, I suppose, initiate and control the whole enterprise there on the spot?"

"But you don't seriously object to my going?" he asked quickly, the pressure of his hands growing heavy, compelling.

"No—no—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"It puts you under further obligations to Mr. Montagu."

"Oh! I thought we should come to that!" he laughed— "But pray make yourself easy on that score, my dear, for it doesn't in the least. On the contrary it puts Montagu under an obligation to me—which he is the first to recognise, let me add. I undertake the journey, the diplomacy, the work and worry

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of bringing everything into line, of starting the machine generally; while he—notwithstanding profitable participation in the results—is free to stay here at home in gross comfort such as his soul loves."

"He has no soul," Frances Copley broke out, with a concentrated bitterness very startling from a woman so habitually self-restrained and sweet.

"How you do hate the poor brute!" Morris took her up directly, half amused and half vexed. "And all the while he thinks you simple perfection, too! Well, gross comfort then, such as his rather too obvious body loves. —Does that rendering please you better, my dear?"

He turned away, moving towards the range of front windows, four in a row, while vexation gained on amusement. She was narrow-minded, prejudiced! Her refinement tended to make her altogether too censorious.

"Oh! you needn't enlarge on the subject, you needn't tell me, my dear Fan," he waved her off with as she attempted to speak. "You don't pay me the uncommonly poor compliment, I imagine, of supposing me dead blind to Montagu's peculiarities? I am perfectly aware he doesn't belong to our world—to

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your world perhaps I'd better say, so as to be carefully accurate.—Though, allow me to add, there are scores of women in it who would swallow him and his money at a single gulp did they but get the chance! He mayn't be up to your fastidious standards—may be a bounder, in short; but he is a thundering good man of business, too, with a grasp and a foresight I've rarely seen equalled and never surpassed. Then in addition I can't, nor do I want to forget he has been as faithful a friend to me as ever a man had. I have no wish to hurt your feelings, Fanny, but I must remind you when things went so deucedly wrong last winter, not one of your own people held out so much as a little finger to help. If despised Charlie Montagu had not stepped into the breech, I give you my word I should hardly have been saved from a very ugly form of—"

But Frances Copley was upon her feet. She interrupted him breathlessly.

"Morris, Morris, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" he demanded facing round on her. "Great Heavens, Fan, what's taken you? For pity's sake don't look so distracted, so unnatural!"

"But didn't you hear?" she insisted. "The

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report of a revolver, a pistol shot and then something, someone fall?"

"Pistol shot—nonsense. A burst motor tyre out in the road, probably.—Not that honestly, my dear child, I heard a sound."

"No—no it wasn't a motor tyre, nothing to do with a tyre," she said, coming close to him, leaning against him in her agitation, so that he felt her whole frame quiver from the violence of her heart beats—"And it wasn't in the road; but close here, just below the windows, in the garden."

Copley slipped his arm round her waist supporting her. The assertions she made were manifestly absurd. Robust commonsense condemned them utterly. Yet her emotion impressed him as sincere, too poignantly so, indeed, to admit of his just laughing it off. He forgot his late vexation in interest as to the cause of her existing condition; for was it not unexampled to see Frances at once vapourish and almost violent thus? She had been for so long his private possession, that habit brought with it the "take-you-for-granted attitude which, between man and wife, paves the way to neglect—on the man's part. She was still his possession—not for an instant did it occur to him to entertain

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doubts on that point—but within the last ten minutes a differently endowed and unfamiliar one, of which the whole appearance and atmosphere sprung a surprise on him, sharply challenging to his curiosity.

Not the least element in his surprise was recognition of her rare beauty in this strange mood, wherein, though she claimed him, made use of him, he actually counted—as he irresistibly perceived—for rather less than nothing! The weight of her tall slender figure rested delicately on his arm and against him, as by right; yet without any appreciation of him, save as a conveniently supporting piece of domestic furniture say. Her large light-brown eyes, matching her hair in colour—"mothlike" was Lady Lucia FitzGibbon's word for them, and they did call to mind those of some soft, shadowy, night-flying creature—were fixedly wide open. Not, as he felt, that they foolishly or affectedly stared, least of all, stared at him.—He could indeed have put up with a far larger share of their glances, which were notably exquisite, just now, to his thinking—But searched, looking through, rather than at, all objects presented to them, as though striving to wrest an answer, wrest knowledge, from some not readily

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penetrable medium. And he became queerly jealous of that—whatever it might be, however unreal, however intangible—for which her eyes thus searched. Became queerly anxious to convince her, seriously, finally, of its non-existence; and so force her strayed thought back upon his own great self. For the moment he was in love with her, in short, actively, consciously, moved by her and drawn to her as he had not been for a length of time he did not quite care to measure.

"Come and see for yourself, Fan," he said. "Come and see for yourself,"—and, holding away the lace curtain with his disengaged hand, he drew her forward into the shallow embrasure of the window.

Under that singular and captivating empire of daylight which refuses quite to die, and of lamp-light which fails quite to conquer it, the whiteness of portico, steps, foolish would-be roguishly ball-throwing lions, and flagged way before the house front, gleamed up placid and unbroken. The square garden itself—the weather-worn sundial, holding the centre of the oval-shaped rose-bed edged with pale rounded pebbles, the broad gravel path encircling these, the now clipped and tidy, though rather leggy, privet hedge and stunted

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rhododendron and orcuba bushes, below it, filling in the two outer corners of the square—lay open to inspection as an unrolled map. Barely could the garden afford concealment to a tom-cat, and very certainly to nothing of larger growth than one of those pervasive and privileged bravos.

"Well, my dear?" Morris Copley asked, smiling at her, half masterful, half pleading and wholly plausible, straining her to his side, meanwhile, with a vigour compelling her attention. "Where, tell me, are the signs or consequences of your wonderful shooting episode?"

"Nowhere," Frances answered, with a long drawn sigh.

Then she brought her wide, mothlike eyes to bear on her husband in dawning and startled recognition of his undeniably ardent attitude.

"Still I heard it, Morry, I did hear it," she repeated, though more, as he saw, in attestation of the truthfulness of her original outcry, than in any attempted refutation of the contrary evidence he offered.

"All the more reason for your consulting Plowden, then," he caught her up. "It's no use trying to throw dust in my eyes, Fan,

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not the very faintest. Exile here, in this impossible place is getting upon your nerves. The deuce knows it would on mine if I spent day after day here! No, my dear child, the sooner I have you back in Grosvenor Square and civilisation, have you back in your own world—which I swear is the only suitable and natural one for you, though I did just now fling stones at it—so very much the better. You may, and do, look lovely in this incongruous setting—Lucia's correct enough there whatever her gift of romancing—but, all the same, I am convinced something is wrong with you, and something for which this place is responsible."

And as Frances began to protest—inwardly jealous for the reputation of her tall villa and the prodigy it harboured, the prodigy which, after weeks of apprehended push and effort, in the precious silence to-night had glimmered through at her—Morris, swept by a gust of passion, stopped her mouth with kisses.

"See here," he said, taking her two hands and drawing her back into the lofty white-walled room away from the window, "will you just cut all this, here and now, and come on the trip to South America with me?"

For a minute Frances, carried away by the

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brave fervour of his manner, played with the idea—looking him in the eyes, trying exactly to sound him, and to sound herself, too, through the mist of charm and of distrust he alternately raised in her.

"Do you really want me to come, Morry?" she questioned him, not without wistfulness.

"I do, I do," he asserted. "Why, in the name of common sense, dearest Fan, should I propose your coming if I didn't really want you?"

"Oh! there might be other reasons—the avoidance of some greater *ennui*, the promotion of some——"

She broke off and looked down, her lips taking for a moment a bitter line.

"But it is altogether delightful of you to ask me," she added, lifting her eyes to his again immediately and sweetly. "I shall never forget it, dear. I shall lay it up in rose leaves and spices among my best treasures of memory, and take it out and look at it, from time to time, with infinite pleasure."

"Then you come?" he said in a very proper tone of exultation, though letting go her hands somewhat suddenly perhaps.

Frances shook her head, smiling.

"No I don't—there's just the beauty of it

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for us both, I think. For I should not be at all effective on such an adventurous journey. Sooner or later I must infallibly be in your way and hamper your movements, consideration for my comfort, in some form or other, coming between you and your business. And business, the successful accomplishment of what you set out to do, is the main thing, isn't it? To be a handicap—think how odious, how unpardonably stupid! Oh! I see quite clearly," she went on. "You must be absolutely free. It would neither be fair on you, nor on the undertaking generally, that you should have such a domesticated and unenterprising woman as I am tacked on to you."

Frances Copley spoke with rising assurance, amounting even to gaiety. Of her husband's genius for making money she was as certain as of the rising of the sun to-morrow. Apparent eclipse, in his case, merely argued storage of energy. If those rocks of the Chilean-Bolivian Andes, had not reared their crests above the horizon inviting him to smite them, Moses-like, and set silver streams flowing, then something else would—such was her inalienable conviction—the release of silver streams, from one source or another, being with him inevitable.

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In the back of her mind she had, all along, previsioned eventual return to Grosvenor Square, or some equivalent of that distinguished locality. Morris was made that way. To the unwise he appeared to go under. But she knew better. To her it was inconceivable that he should stay under. By some trick—at the word, for she used it advisedly, her lips took the bitter line again—some skilful trick of legerdemain all he touched was bound to turn into money. The trick had started working now, thanks—though through what exact combination she was ignorant—to Charlie Montagu. Hence merciless re-clamping to the dizzily turning social wheel at no distant date awaited her—her independence crushed, her cherished leisure ravished away from her—unless she could find means to consolidate her freedom, consolidate her very self, by forcing, so at least she read it, further disclosure from out the shy hide-and-seek of the tall villa, by meeting and holding the thing which happened next, and thus unmasking both the logic of her past and the direction, for conquest or submission, of her coming life. Her "America," was, as she told herself, in the most literal sense, "here or nowhere," let Morris's be where it might.

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All which, as it flashed through her, roused her to a tenacity of purpose not easy gracefully to dissimulate.

"No, no, my dear Morry," she therefore wound up, with determined lightness, "most emphatically it would be folly for me to go with you. And what costly folly at that, for one doesn't travel half round the globe on a bare twopence halfpenny, as you will admit!"

"The cost could be met," he took her up largely, as one sweeping aside a quite unworthy objection.

—Though not out of her modest income or his damaged credit, as Frances reflected. There remained Montagu's bulging pockets, and to these she reluctantly feared he alluded. But she entered no protest, just letting the remark drop. For Morris had shown at his best during this last half hour. She had resisted him, yet was too grateful to suffer introduction of any discordant note.

"But, of course, if you really shirk the long journey, and possible roughing it, which I'm afraid the journey must entail in parts, we must leave matters at that," he went on; and was there not, she asked herself, a flavour of relief perceptible behind the tenderness of his tone and bright affection of his handsome

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face? "Heaven knows I don't want to be selfish, and sacrifice you to my own pleasure in having you with me. Only, let it be understood, the decision is yours not mine."—

He raised his shoulders and spread out his hands as in playfully regretful resignation, smiling at her.

"Have your own way, dear Fan," he said, "I submit."

"Yes, you let me have my own way, and it is very sweet of you," Frances answered, her mothlike eyes strangely alight.

"And aren't we both bluffing, just bluffing? How very hateful!" she thought to herself.

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CHAPTER III

MORRIS COPLEY'S start for his field of operations in the western hemisphere may, not inaptly, be described as tumultuous. The leaving of all troublesomenesses—certain aspects of his marriage not impossibly included—behind him, and the prospect of wealth-bringing adventure ahead, combined to fill him to overflowing with gallant animation. From the moment the inhabitants of Napworth Castle—Lord Bulparc's fine place in Hampshire—received news of his intended departure, the doors of that historic mansion opened wide to receive his wife during so much of her temporary widowhood as she should care to spend there. This suited the traveller to perfection. It looked well, sounded well; and, while conveniently relieving him of responsibility concerning her, advertised to the world at large that neither his rather discreditable financial position, nor their joint migration to the purlieus of Primrose Hill, had compromised his wife's position with her own people.

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Frances did, in point of fact, pay her noble relations a visit of quite old-fashioned amplitude; and, during the initial weeks of it, at all events, derived no small pleasure or benefit therefrom. The domestic atmosphere of Napworth was not charged with intellectuality, nor its social atmosphere with drama of any conspicuous sort. Life moved forward in stately and complacent monotony. A Primrose League fête—with speeches—on a monumental scale, succeeded first by a Friendly Girls' Tea, and later by a cricket week, of correspondingly extensive proportions, registered the high water-mark of political, philanthropic and athletic effort. But the mellow, deep-rooted comfort, the spacious and peaceful beauty of the great house and its many acres of park, lake, river, woods and gardens—well known to her from childhood—were undoubtedly very grateful to Frances as an interlude. It is noteworthy that she attached herself to this definition of her stay at Napworth with gentle obstinacy. An "interlude"—low be it spoken, yet very certainly, as she told herself, it represented to her no more than just that!— To remain in London throughout the dead season would have been, as she recognized, bad taste, a proclaim-

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ing of herself a martyr to circumstances—in other words to her husband's wild-cat speculations—little short of vindictive. She might, and reluctantly did, hold definite views as to the questionable character of some of Morris's business activities; but, Heaven forbid she should give him away! Hence, since she must in loyalty to him spend August and September out of town, Napworth was her choice.

It offered many advantages besides those already enumerated. For example she could, with impunity, wear last year's gowns there. Lady Bulparc, being herself liberally supplied with more recent if less exquisite creations, approved them as evidences of thrift in one whose economic situation was so parlous as that of her niece. His lordship's eye—a lively one for a pretty woman—did not greatly trouble itself with her dress, unless the configuration of the garment in question too modestly tended to conceal, rather than bravely expose, the charms of her person. While Lady Lucia—who was passing the summer with her parents, in preference to enduring the eccentricities of the Irish Sea, followed by those of his estate in the wilds of Sligo, in company with Ulick FitzGibbon, her

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spouse—being restricted in matters of costume, owing to her approaching confinement, found it in her heart, notwithstanding enthusiastic admiration of her cousin, to thank the powers that—"Fanny, poor darling, wasn't quite too fearfully and wonderfully smart for words just now!"

In the first few weeks of her sojourn Frances Copley enjoyed the profound security of Napworth the more, because, to be truthful, she had received a pretty sharp shake up just before leaving London.

Through the tumultuous days heralding her husband's departure—Charlie Montagu very much to the fore, moreover, "just looking in, my dear chap, to see how things are moving"—the interior of the tall villa had shown at its barest in sentiment and bleakest in daylight candour. The aura of coming wealth and success so radiantly diffused by Morris, and all the high-spirited paraphernalia of a big journey which encumbered its tables and floors, elicited no response. It stared, blankly elegant and artificial, drawing aside its faded skirts in protest, as it might seem, against such an exhibition of untempered vitality.

Often, during that rather breathless period, Frances Copley questioned, heart-sickly,

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whether the curtain had not been rung down for good and all on her absorbing experience by the pistol shot in the garden, which she so confidently had heard and Morris so confidently had not. Must she accept that, to her immense discomfiture, as the finish of the whole prodigious matter? And, if so, had not the tall villa betrayed her, dangling promises of knowledge it could in no wise redeem; beckoning down avenues of apparent freedom which, in point of fact, led conspicuously no whither? Or did the fault lie in some ineptitude of her own? Had she frustrated the purpose of disclosure surrounding her by deficiency of faith, or of will-power to meet and help forward the push of that attempted breaking through? She could not tell, and really suffered in being unable to do so.

Copley had been three days at sea, and she herself was on the eve of leaving London—all her little arrangements regarding house and household completed, two maids packed off to job places for the remainder of the summer—the third would attend her to Napworth—and the almost terribly respectable wife of a police constable installed in the basement as caretaker—before any sort of answer to these harassing questions was vouchsafed her.

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Then it came, with a stealthy and ambiguous suddenness.

Last hours in a house packed up for one's leaving are inevitably restless and unsatisfactory. One set of habits is broken off. A new set has not yet come into being. After tea, Frances, listlessly busy, set herself to turn out and tidy the drawers of a certain red buhl writing bureau in the drawing-room. These contained an accumulation of letters and papers left over from the Grosvenor Square era, which she had never found inclination or energy to deal with before. She dealt with them now in obedience to the false conscience that restlessness, and, as in her case, fatigue so often engenders.

Amongst them she presently lighted upon a number of art dealer's lists, and catalogues of picture shows, which she had formerly marked with a view to buying. The two brothers Maris, Le Sidaner, Mauves and other names to conjure with, stared at her from their somewhat dusty pages. Over these she wistfully lingered. For she had loved it very dearly, that so carefully selected collection of modern French and Flemish paintings. To part with them had shrewdly pained her. Sitting here alone, in packed up house

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and lowering light, she felt it pain her still. And this not merely from a natural jealousy at having her private possessions become the property of strangers; but because these particular pictures, all and severally, spoke words she badly wanted spoken, words she delighted to hear—spoke them in rare modulations, rare harmonies and gradations of form and colour, to her charged with subtle meanings, subtle echoes from out the infinite of life. Her imagination rallied to them, this evening, as to things of edifying and consoling worth, by loss of which she was not only materially but spiritually the poorer. Rallied to them all the more that she was sadly out of conceit, just now, with the tall villa, which after beginning, as she read it, to speak words of the same illuminating quality—though through a very different medium—had gone back on her, making a fool of her, and played her false.

The stifling August afternoon closed in thunder and petulant downpour of hot rain. Sitting at the bureau—placed across the corner of the room, a high narrow window to right and to left of her—Frances could see the moisture rise in steam off the parched pavements and roadway of the side street; and

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shroud, not only the more distant trees in the park, but those growing upon the scorched slope of the canal bank, with a curtain of indigo mist—an effect mournful and stagnant. The air of the room, too, was stagnant; for during the height of the shower she had been forced to shut the windows against the insplash of rain. And though, in compensation, she had opened the doors on to the gallery of the stairhead small refreshment reached her thence, the whole house being saturated by long continued sunshine and the peculiar deadness of London summer heat.

All which helped to deepen the discouragement remembrance of those well-beloved, and now widely scattered, pictures produced in her. Never, until this melancholy hour, so she reflected, had she quite measured all her husband's financial smash and "the treachery" —for by this large sounding phrase did she qualify her experience—"the treachery of the tall villa" had cost her! Yet presently, by inevitable reaction, this sombre thought led on to one of another quality—namely that, should his South American venture eventuate, as Morris so buoyantly predicted, in the gushing forth of handsomer silver streams than

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ever, her former rich license of expenditure would be restored.

Frances turned sideways, resting her elbow upon the flat, elaborately patterned writing flap of the red buhl bureau, her chin in her hand, while her mothlike eyes searched the pall of thunder mist covering the near trees. Half resentfully she entertained this thought of recovered riches and the consequences thence deriving. For to do so signalled—didn't it?—a declension from her recent high serenity of altitude. Nevertheless she dallied with the thought, unable to put it from her. Once again, and wearing enchanting clothes too, she could haunt dealers' galleries, an honoured patron; and buy all which her intelligence commended and coveted of beautiful and inspiring in art. May not the possession of conspicuous wealth amount, sanely considered, to a great romance through the power it bestows, potent as some mighty magician, over all things, save—well—save the ironic catastrophes of accident, disease and death? Even hearts can be bought; and that not always basely, since gratitude is very surely to be counted among the virtues, a certain popular cynical definition of it notwithstanding. To be rich, very rich?— Through

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inexperience, through perversity also, perhaps, had she not under-rated the spacious opportunities it confers? Now, wiser by her wider knowledge of ordinary conditions, might not riches, if they returned, in and by themselves suffice?

And, indirect rehabilitation of Morris and all Morris stood for being thus rather quaintly initiated, Frances began to ask whether that which he once said to her about the revenge convention is bound, sooner or later, to take on whoso wilfully outrage it, might not indeed be true? Was he not possibly right, his own brilliant opportunism the sanest, most satisfying investment modern humanity—for the majority of which the great faiths, the supreme self-devotions are extinct—could well make? While, who was she, as she sadly reflected, in any case to set herself in opposition to the standards of her age and class? She who, in no single department—not even the obvious and primitive one of child-bearing—had, to put it roughly, scored a success? Why be too nice, then, to accept current values? Why fret herself with the struggle to build higher or sink foundations deeper than the rest? She really wasn't worth all that. And to take herself, her own needs and ideas, so

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seriously merely argued a refinement of self-seeking and self-conceit.

Arrived at which depressing point of introspection, she turned her head, though still resting chin and cheek on her hand, conscious that a shadow crossed the other end of the room from the open doors to a certain gilt arm chair on the left of the fire-place. It did not lie along the floor or rest on intervening objects, as do shadows cast by some solid body; but walked upright, while upon the thick grey carpet she could just hear its muffled tread.

Frances Copley was not only startled but frightened, horribly frightened, so that her heart felt to stand still and her hands and feet grow cold and heavy as lead. She could not move, the weight of them, the weight of her whole slender person, in fact seeming too overpoweringly great. Neither could she find voice, in her weakness, to cry out. Thus was she, perforce, held immobile till the first violence of the shock passed off. By then—actually a matter of a few seconds—although fear, shrewd and intimate, remained, she had regained sufficient self-control and bodily steadiness to observe and to think.

Presently the shadow sat down in, or rather

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sank on to the chair, the carved gilded frame and platted cane back and seat of which showed through it. And to Frances Copley watching, there was in this something so agitating, so even hideous, that she closed her eyes unable further to endure the sight. Confusedly, in the pause which followed, she heard the tap, tap, of rain dripping onto the window ledge from some stone projection above. Heard the swish of a motor's tyres along the swimming roadway. And these ordinary, everyday sounds were curiously comforting, giving her courage again to look.

So doing, she became sensible of a change, a development, which made her eyes grow wide with new wonder, new apprehension.

For the shadow could no longer be thus simply described. It had grown, in some degree, substantial, taking on, for the most part, definite outline, definite form and shape.—That, namely, of a young man, of notably distinguished bearing, dressed—in as far as, through the sullen evening light, Frances could make out—in clothes of the highest fashion though according to a long discarded colouring and cut. The face alone still continued indistinct, unpleasantly more vague and nebulous than the voluminous black satin

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stock supporting the chin, the tightly buttoned, short-waisted blue coat—with tails but no skirts to it—the buff breeches and riding boots nearly reaching the knee, and pliable enough about the ankle to display its shapeliness.

One foot was advanced; the other drawn back under the chair, the heel raised. The right hand hung over the chair-arm, apparently clasping some object, the exact nature of which Frances could not, in her present position, determine. The left hand, clenched, was pressed against its forehead, as the figure leaned forward in an attitude of dejection—was it?—or of waiting and suspense.

And in all this surely the tall villa redeemed its promises up to the hilt, surrendering to Frances Copley the hidden thing she had so persistently asked of it, so consciously invited and pursued. For here, if you like, was prodigy, visibly and sensibly enthroned, presenting itself to her amazed and shrinking gaze. And that she did shrink, notwithstanding clearness of brain and recovered self-control, she was only too disagreeably aware.

As the minutes passed alarm increased to the point—as she shudderingly registered—of filling the lofty, dusky room throughout its

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length, breadth and height. And this exactly because she was clever enough to reckon, not only with the immediate but with the obscure and remote bearings of her extraordinary case. Clever enough to understand that, in respect of it, she had broken with normal experience, had crossed the frontier of things conditioned and consequently permissible; and now confronted regions where all natural law—as we know it—ceases to operate. Fairly grasped this was surely a sufficiently staggering intellectual situation. To what moral danger, what mental terror might she not, then, be exposed?

If she could have distinctly seen the face of her astonishing visitant, and thereby gathered some idea of his character and purposes, she would, so she held, have felt less terribly unprotected and astray. But that blurred and unintelligent surface blunted all her weapons whether of attack or of defence. The very distinction of his otherwise handsome person, even the brave clothing he wore, only added, by their grotesquely ironical contrast, to the extreme shockingness of that amorphous countenance. In how far must she hold herself responsible for his coming? And, granting she had, in some sort, called him, forced him,

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was his present intention to implore the sweetness of a living woman's pity; or to chastise her impertinence in thus violating his ghostly immunity from the battle and ravage of continued earthly life?

She could not tell—which uncertainty so shrewdly tormented her that, presently seeing him move, lean further forward, his head raised as though fixing her with those undiscoverable eyes, his left hand extended as in appeal or reprobation, Frances Copley could no longer repress her emotion. She drifted on to her feet, softly wailing:—

"Go—go—or show yourself plainly. Go—or tell me what it is you want of me. I will listen. Indeed I will do anything, anything not actually wrong, which you require of me. If, in some manner I don't understand, I have intruded upon your repose and brought you here against your will, I beg you to forgive me. I acted in ignorance, for nothing could be further from my wishes than to trouble or hurt you. Only show yourself plainly, so that I may know what you are, know to whom I am speaking——"

But there, across the gentle tempest of her denial and entreaty, the voice of the housemaid cut in crudely:

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"Mr. Montagu's downstairs, Ma'am, asking to see you. Shall I show him up?"

The gentleman in question, however, was an altogether too seasoned campaigner, where his interests or admirations were concerned, to waste time—so often but another name for golden opportunity—in ceremonial observances. Learning Frances Copley to be at home he did not wait to be "shown up," but followed the pink, slightly flurried young housemaid hot-foot—this the more readily that she was a pretty, trim-figured creature. Already his showy person bulked big on the gallery outside; and, after the briefest delay admissible, projected itself into the dim, fear-smitten drawing-room.

"Awfully fortunate to have caught you, Mrs. Copley," he began, with loud cordiality, pulling off his right hand glove. "I was more than half afraid you'd have flitted—Copley told me you were due at Lord Bulparc's place in Hants. I must apologise for invading you at such an unconventional hour; but I've just run up for the night from my little shanty at Marlow. . . . Should uncommonly like to show it you some day—not on the Napworth scale, of course, but a dinky little patch for all that. . . . A great hobby of mine, gar-

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dening. . . . Brought up a few roses, in the car, as samples. . . . Gave them to your girl downstairs, just to shake the wet off before you handle them. . . . I felt I couldn't be up in town very well, without calling to enquire how you were getting along without the *caro sposo*. Felt there might be some trifling matter in which I could be of service to you, perhaps. Things do turn up sometimes, when a lady's alone, you know, which are easiest adjusted by a member of my sex. No harm in asking, anyhow!"

And he ended on a rather forced and tentative laugh.

Throughout this address, in fact, Montagu exhibited the oddest blend of watchfulness and swagger. He talked fast, may even be said to have gabbled, in the desire to conceal his uneasiness; for he was not in the least sure as to the reception awaiting him.

"Hang it all, how's my lady going to take this move?" If he had put that question to himself once, as the great car swept along the, first dusty and then streaming, roads into London, he had put it twenty times. "What the deuce will she make of it? Will there be a frost?"

And he stuck out his coarse under-lip and

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squared his heavy shoulders, prepared, if needs be, to bully that possible frost into very effectual melting.

But something quite other than bullying was, in the sequel, demanded of him. And, to his credit let it be stated, after scantiest hesitation, every ounce of decency in his hulking, sixteen-stone carcass did instinctively respond to that demand so strangely made.

For the flurried young housemaid—into whose hands the wet roses had not been delivered without complimentary oglings—having retired as far as the stairhead, advised herself to come hastily back and turn on the electric switches just inside the folding doors, thereby flooding the room with primrose-tinted light. In this instant illumination Montagu beheld his hostess, as though suddenly awakened to the fact of his presence, turn from the buhl bureau before which she was standing and, with a little cry, make a wild soft rush at him.

Wide-eyed, very fragile, as it struck him, and excessively lovely, she caught at his arm with both hands, an extraordinary expression in her blanched upturned face.

For the moment Montagu came near losing himself and committing an egregious and

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rather blackguardly folly. The blood went to his head. But, happily, for a moment only. Native shrewdness came to his rescue, reinforced by the decencies aforesaid. For women of Mrs. Copley's quality and position don't, as he reasoned, throw themselves into a man's arms casually, in this abandoned fashion, without cause. If she thus ran to him, it was simply because she very much ran away from something or somebody else. To take advantage of her distraction, was to close the door on all future intercourse, to lose her for good and all, in short. To play a chivalrous part by her was to establish a relation difficult subsequently to ignore or to break. He glanced about him sharply in search of a possible cause of her so evident terror and distress; and saw nothing save the extra bareness of a room denuded of ornament in the interests of approaching departure, a room particularly incapable of concealments because practically packed up. Saw nothing, yet vaguely, incomprehensibly felt he was being watched; and in this found a challenge to the very best behaviour he could produce.

"But, my dear Mrs. Copley," he said soothingly, "what ever's upset you like this? Not

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had any bad news, have you? Nothing wrong with our South American traveller, I hope? Come and sit down,—here upon the sofa—and tell me all about it."

Then, as she obediently subsided on to the cushions, it came to him as an inspiration not to do what was obvious, namely take his place familiarly beside her, but to remain standing. She was in an uncommon rum state, thus he put it. So, as she came round, let her feel secure; safe of protection, yet by no means taken possession of or impinged upon to the lessening of her dignity and self-respect.—Oh, he'd play the game, so he told himself, very much play the game of scrupulous delicacy. It was the thing to do—moreover, in the long run, wouldn't it pay?—He thought it would.

But at this stage of the proceedings, Frances Copley was still too dazed to be capable of any "telling." Her rush and clutch at him had been instinctive, involuntary, indeed unconscious. Now she sat upright, pressing her hands down upon the bed of the sofa on either side of her, her eyes half closed, trying to control her thought, her senses, trying also to control the recurrent shudder which plucked at her jaw and raced down her

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spine. And, in this effort, the very size of the man, planted there so solidly in front of her, his very commonness, the gross, healthy, bull-like build and animal force of him, helped her, by their enormity of contrast, to stagger back from out the phantasmal, the abnormal, into ordinary relation to ordinary, law-subjected things. Precisely that which she formerly condemned in him, now—though she was powerless as yet of reasoning it out—appeared his merit. He was of the earth, earthly; and upon that earthliness, as on a sure foundation, she set her so strangely strayed and now returning feet.

Presently her eye-lids fluttered, and then steadied as she looked down the length of the bright, naked room to the gold arm-chair at the left of the fire-place. And Charlie Montagu, carefully observing her, saw her fetch a deep sigh and relax to a less strained and anxious attitude.

"Feeling better, Mrs. Copley, eh?" he asked.

"Better?—oh! yes, thanks," she answered, speaking at first vaguely, like one only half awake; but gaining poise and manner as she went on. "I cannot explain what affected me so much. I really hardly know myself. But

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not bad news, nothing of that sort. The thunder, I suppose, and the dusk."

She paused, a shudder catching her again.

"I felt absurdly confused and faint. I have—foolishly—stayed indoors all day; and the heat is so heavy, isn't it?"

"But not in here," he took her up. "You're as cool as a cucumber in here, my dear lady; not to say as cold as charity. When I came in, I give you my word, I was almost knocked over by it. Wondered what dodge you could have for keeping the temperature so low in this basting weather—saw a little fortune in the trick if one could patent it—eh?" and he laughed encouragingly. "Marvellous—positively marvellous! What the deuce has she been at? I'll eat my hat if I know," he said to himself.

For, as he spoke, Frances Copley looked up, her graceful body stiffening again, while terror unmistakable and of high refinement, stared out of her large light-brown eyes.

"Was it cold in this room? Is it cold still?" she asked, with an odd sharpness of enquiry.

"No, it's not. The temperature seems to have gone up with a bounce in the last minute or so.—No refrigerating trick to patent after

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all, I'm afraid, and so rope in the boodle!" and he laughed again.

"I am glad," Frances Copley said, sinking back in her corner of the sofa and half closing her eyes.

Montagu looked hard at her. His allusion to the chill, he had so sensibly felt on entering, was, for some reason, unpleasant to her.—The mention of it clearly a blunder on his part. But why? As long as she stayed so desperately scared it was evident he could make nothing of her. Moreover to see any woman so scared amounted to being downright painful. He wanted to know what had taken place—wanted it badly, all his rather coarse curiosity at burning point. But he also, and sincerely, wanted to soothe, to relieve, to—in a sense—secure her, by a display of sympathy and friendliness. Thereupon, Charlie Montagu decided to take the risk of letting himself go a little. That answered with most women, as he knew by large and varied experience. Might it not, after all, answer in the present case? He drew up a chair and seated himself, throwing one leg across the other, his left hand nursing his right ankle, his right hand lying along the head of the sofa as he fingered the corner of one of the silk

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cushions—the very picture of easy good nature, of your thorough good-hearted and honest "good sort."

"See here, my dear lady," he said in tones of amiable argument, "Heaven knows I don't want to pester you with prying questions and force myself into your confidence. But there's no denying I find you terribly upset; and I really can't be expected, in reason, to leave you till you're more yourself. I called, as I told you, to see if there was any little matter in which I could be of use. Well, it's very clearly borne in on me I can be of use, and in a way which gives me more pleasure than I can readily express. You've been here by yourself a lot too long, packing up and all the rest of it——"

"I go to Napworth to-morrow," Frances interjected.

"Delighted to hear it," he shot back, in generous agreement. "But to-morrow's to-morrow, you'll pardon my observing, and a good many hours off yet. I can't consent to your remaining here alone meanwhile. No, my dear Mrs. Copley, it simply won't do. You're putting too great a strain on yourself. What you need is a little fillip in the way of

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society. Any's better than none—even mine, at a push——"

He paused.

"You are really very kind," she could not but murmur.

"Not a bit, not a bit—except to myself.—I refuse to let you stay here and mope. Come out and dine quietly with me, and we'll go on to one of the Halls afterwards. Name your own restaurant—Carlton or Soho, just as you like—and your own entertainment. I don't care where, or what, so long as you do me the honour of being my guest. No question of dressing, you know. Just come as you are and forgive my country togs."

He got onto his feet, towering above her, beaming down at her, genuine in his solicitude for her immediate well-being, whatever ulterior hopes or purposes might haunt the recesses of such mind as he possessed. And that superficial sincerity and solicitude worked upon Frances, in her existing condition, very strongly. She could not look beyond the present, and the sense of relief and safety which his large masculine presence produced.

"I take no denial," he went on. "My car's here at your gate and the rain's ceased. Yes —you'll come, then?"

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He rubbed his hands together; and just remembered not to slap his thigh in his extreme gratification.

"Awfully charming of you, I'm sure; and, if you'll pardon plain speaking, uncommonly sensible too, Mrs. Copley. I'll guarantee the little jaunt to drive away the hump and do you good.—By the way, may I have the use of the phone, in Copley's den, for a couple of minutes? I must alter the date of an appointment.—Nothing of the slightest importance.—No, after you please, my dear lady. I'm going to see you safely started on your way upstairs before I retire to telephone.—Can't allow you time to change your mind, you know, and give me the slip."

And laughing, he shepherded her out onto the gallery, carefully closing the double doors behind him.

Once alone all geniality died out of his bold high-coloured face. He looked back at the shut doors savagely, sticking out his under lip.

"Damned if there isn't something beastly unpleasant about that room," he said to himself. "Now if I was superstitious—but thank the Lord I'm not——"

And he swaggered away downstairs to can-

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cel, by telephone, an engagement for this evening with another remarkably pretty young woman, though of a quite different style and social order to Frances Copley.—Miss Myrtle Vane of "beauty chorus" celebrity, whose not unnatural fury at his desertion could, after all as he cynically reflected, be satisfactorily assuaged by the gift of a dozen of sweet champagne and a new Marie Soeurs et Cie. frock.

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CHAPTER IV

Amidst the fine amenities offered by life at Napworth, Frances Copley found, first a rest cure, and then self-reproach.

For she slipped back into the country house routine—so agreeably fenced against intrusive vulgarities, so sheltered and padded, not to say smotheringly feather-bedded against the multiple shocks and jars of average experience—as some rare silver-scaled fish, caught and thrown gasping upon the river-bank for an atrocious few minutes, might slip back into the cool delight of deep slow-flowing water. Restored thus to her native element, she let herself go, taking no thought of before or after, in the charming safety of it all. In past moments of high aspiration she had girded, it is true, at the tyranny of the social wheel and its ceaseless revolutions. But she was tired, in a mood neither enterprising nor reforming. While never, assuredly, did the wheel turn to pleasanter or less hustling purpose than here at Napworth—through the

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mellow sweetness of summer days and nights, on the southward-facing, stone-balustered terrace; in the bravely radiant flower-gardens; or on the great lawns below, shaded by spreading cedars, whence wide grey steps, half hidden in wistaria and trailing roses, opened upon the lake. On the opposite side of the lake, the well timbered park climbed, in gentle undulations, to woodlands set along the sky-line, and across the turf and through the now yellowing bracken, ranged companies of fallow deer.

To Frances it all was beautiful, and that with a high dignity for which her perturbed and fluttered spirit just now cried aloud. She would, indeed, have rejoiced, during those first weeks at Napworth, henceforth to limit her world to the gracious fraction of it enclosed by park-wall and deer-paling and never set foot without those aristocratic barriers again. This, more particularly, in the interests of her so desirable rest-cure. For, that eminently agitating things—and they in great degree of her own wilful evocation—did scaringly lurk and boisterously swagger outside that thrice-blessed barrier, she could in no wise deny.

About these last she, quite tremendously,

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did not want to think. She hardened her heart against them, still more hardened her conscience—for they attacked her on the moral plane—and lent herself with unwonted animation to the mild excitements, the small events, plans, pleasantries and discussions of the hour.

This attitude Lady Bulparc warmly approved, telling quite a number of persons, whom it in no degree concerned, that—"all poor Frances had gone through owing to her husband, Morris Copley's disgraceful behaviour—he had been hammered on the Stock Exchange or something dreadful of that sort, which she"—the speaker—"didn't in the least understand—had so very much improved her. She had given up so many of her exaggerations; was so much more like other people, less fanciful and *prècieuse*. Eccentricity is always objectionable, but particularly so in a woman in poor Frances' unfortunate position —*Nouveaux riches* without the riches, don't you know."—Thus may superficial aspects of an almost tragic fall from grace commend the fallen to the conventional and worldly-minded!

And that, during the last strange evening spent in London, she had very much fallen

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from grace Frances Copley became increasingly convinced, as her shaken nerves steadied and her mental sincerity asserted itself. Hence gnawings of self-reproach not easy to ignore or to combat.

Fear—in itself, according to her creed, a thing to be heartily ashamed of—had made her lose her head, to the point of inviting the pity and accepting the hospitality of a man whom she had reason both to distrust and dislike. After so very much riding the high horse with Morris, in respect of his own obligations to Charlie Montagu, she had incurred obligations and those of a delicate character towards him herself! It wasn't logical, still less was it becoming! Humiliation cut deep. All the deeper, perhaps, because there had been nothing—Montagu's lack of breeding once admitted—to which she could reasonably take exception in his conduct. He had, indeed, shown praiseworthy good feeling and good taste; very cleverly, thereby, laying up merit, upon which if he elected to draw, at some future date, she could hardly refuse to honour the draught. In ordinary courtesy, ordinary gratitude, she must receive him and be nice to him after Morris came back—even before Morris came back not improbably. She could

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diplomatise; but effectually to snub, or give him the go-by, she henceforth could not.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that her recollections of that extraordinary evening were disjointed and incomplete, nightmareish in their absence of cohesion and sequence. The rush of the car through the shining rain-washed streets, the lights and noise of the restaurant with its feeding crowd; the dancers, jokers, singers, acrobats, all the glittering quick-change medley of the music hall performance, rioted—to her seeing—in wild arabesque across a black background of limitless alarm. Amid the extravagance and immense incongruity of it all, she failed to disentangle impressions and sensations from words actually spoken and deeds actually accomplished. There were tormenting blanks in her retrospect. She remembered, for instance, making a distracted appeal to the spectral figure sitting in the armchair at the far end of the dusky drawing-room; remembered subsequently struggling back, from some depth of physical faintness, into normal consciousness of her surroundings, to find Montagu, reassuringly high-coloured and corporeal, standing squarely in front of her. But in the interim what exactly had hap-

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pened? What had she said or done? How far, in words or in impulsive fear-driven action, had she compromised herself?

And she went hot and went cold, now, at the thought of those moments so awkwardly unaccounted for, the social complication having singularly gained in importance in this house-party atmosphere, while the far more vital matter of the supernatural receded into comparative insignificance. Such shifting of values was almost inevitable in the case of one so open to external influences as Frances Copley. For, in good truth, what possible connection have Primrose League Fêtes, or Friendly Girls' teas with occult phenomena? Prolific in slightly outworn superstitions they may be; but hardly on psychic or theurgic lines.

So by this time it followed that Frances went as far as to question whether she had ever been in touch with the supernatural at all.—To doubt if she was not, in respect of all that, the dupe of her own disordered imagination; whether as Morris, at an earlier stage of the whole amazing business asserted, it wasn't simply a matter for her doctor, for nerve tonics and change of air and scene. If he were right, and this the real explanation,

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she had more than ever cause for self-reproach and angry shame. For, if there had been nothing to frighten her beyond her own sick fancies, she stood condemned of weakness and of folly in the extreme.

Around these tormenting propositions her mind worked and weaved, weaved and worked, until the rest and content of Napworth was threatened with eclipse. Not that the dear place was less beautiful,—but that she was, in her own estimation, less worthy of its beauty. For what traffic, as she told herself, could it in its high dignity, its sustained nobleness of aspect, be expected to hold with cowardice, with morbid hallucinations, or with moral indebtedness to a person of Charlie Montagu's social kidney? From all which it may, not unreasonably, be inferred that Lady Bulparc's rejoicings over her niece's delivery from "exaggerations" were—perhaps happily —a little premature.

The cricket-week ended and the house-party broke up. All the good-looking, well-groomed, sweet-tempered and slightly brainless youths—for your crack bats-man is rarely afflicted with genius—along with all the pretty young girls and smart young married women invited to meet, amuse, and admire them, had

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gone their several ways, when the wind of discomfort veered for Frances Copley, or rather backed unexpectedly, blowing from a former quarter.

For, having disposed of her duties to her guests, Lady Bulparc now proceeded to dispose of her duty to the neighbourhood in the matter of afternoon calls. Its population had crowded to burn incense at the Napworth shrine immediately on the arrival of the family from town. But Lady Bulparc exercised a crafty discretion in her acknowledgment of such local civilities.

"If I return their visits at once," it was her custom to explain, finely regardless of whoso might, not impossibly, overhear her, "it gives all sorts of people I don't in the least care to see an excuse for calling twice in the summer, which is quite unnecessary. But if I wait, there is always a hope the weather may break up, you know; and the afternoons grow too short for people to come over who live at any distance. Though it was all so much easier for me before there were motor cars. Every twopenny halfpenny little nobody, who we never used to hear of in former days, has one now; so I can never feel really safe unless I give a general order

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of 'not at home'; and then, of course, I risk missing the very few tidy neighbours there are."

Lady Lucia's "condition"—to use the accredited euphemism—excusing her from participation in these belated courtesies, it fell to Frances Copley to act as her aunt's companion. And it was on her return from a more than usually comprehensive progress—since it included luncheon at Filmers, an ancient dower-house in the Harchester district, rented for the summer by certain connections of Lady Bulparc—that the change of wind aforesaid arrestingly greeted her.

Glad to be rid of the dusty roads and of her ladyship's more continuous than enlightening conversation, Frances went straight out on to the southern terrace. Lingering there, for a minute or so, her eyes travelled gratefully over the glory of flower gardens and reposeful coolness of lawns lying immediately below.

Under the cedars an encampment of chairs and a white spread tea-table suggested a gathering. But further observation disclosed no human presence in all the bright calm scene, save that of Lady Lucia—a small, rather huddled, much bedraped mauve figure,

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perched on the dwarf wall protecting the tennis courts and croquet grounds bordering the edge of the lake. She carried a cerise parasol of large circumference, which showed a note of rich vigorous colour as against the expanse of shimmering water and soft greens and yellows of the upward sloping park.

And beholding that lonely little figure, the pathos of her cousin's motherhood, the brute animalism about to assail this pretty, vivacious, delicately nurtured creature, in approaching hours of danger and of pain, struck home to Frances Copley very sharply. She revolted, she pitied—knowing by experience the event in all its shameless crudity—yet did she not envy somewhat, too?

With light swift feet she went down between the glowing flower borders, where bees still droned and over which butterflies dallied, though the afternoon shadows grew long. Down over the exquisite carpet of turf, her grey skirts gracefully sweeping it—for feminine attire had not then reached its present remarkable altitude below and brevity above the waist.

As her cousin drew near, Lady Lucia waved the cerise parasol in welcome.

"So you're back, darling. What a let up!"

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she cried. "I was getting woefully bored with my own company. My father turned up for tea, but made off again directly afterwards. Since when I've cleared the table to feed these guttlesome swans—on the best cake, too, which is simply immoral. I know it is. But what would you have? One must pass the time somehow. Now come and tell me all about it—Mama's last included. Where have you been?

"Mainly at Filmers," Frances said; "for they insisted on showing me all over the house."

"And isn't it simply too heavenly for words?"

"It's a wonderfully perfect example of the thirteenth century, if you want to live that far back in English history. Personally I don't know that I particularly crave to duck my head at every doorway or be able to touch each ceiling with my hand."

"You prefer the proportions of the tall villa, in short?" Lady Lucia took her up, naughtily.

"I prefer Napworth," Frances said, her mind meanwhile returning to that question of motherhood.

For Lucia looked all eyes, as she reflected.

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Eyes set in a pinched, almost witch-like little face. Eyes which seemed to hold back and refuse expression to some ever present thought. Was she unhappy, feeling, in her innermost soul, shocked, even outraged by the strangeness of that which was taking, and still more was soon to take, place? Frances Copley had a great tenderness for her cousin. Conspicuously feminine though she herself was in instinct and feeling, she realised how cruel it is to be a woman.

"Oh! darling Napworth!" Lady Lucia returned. "Of course there's no comparison between the two. Still Filmers always fascinates me, because I'm perfectly sure it's simply crawling with ghosts."

Mrs. Copley made no immediate answer. She indeed sat down a trifle hastily on the broad stone coping of the wall and fell to feeding the swans, which, fierce-eyed and stately, with rustling of stiff wing-coverts and slow stroke of strong black paddles, glided to and fro over the water just beneath.

"And there are no ghosts at Napworth," she presently, and as it might seem, rather inconsequently remarked, forcing a laugh.

"My dear, how should there be?" Lady Lucia softly laughed back. "Isn't Mama in

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possession, and wouldn't she successfully sterilise the most germ-impregnated atmosphere of that particular sort? Any ghost would need the courage of nineteen lions to face her, she presents such an impenetrably solid wall of disbelief—unconscious disbelief, which is the most powerful because the most hopeless description, being utterly beyond the range of argument. If Napworth did ever possess any ghostly inclinations, Mama must have annihilated them years ago. Not that I have ever heard any legends. For the most part the family's walk in life appears to have been of the quite stupidly honestest and least dramatic. If any members of it have ever wanted to run rigs they've been careful, I gather, to run them elsewhere."

And she, too, fell to feeding the swans.

"As for example?" Mrs. Copley asked, relieved to have the conversation drift away from Filmers and the question of hauntings which it had appeared likely to develop.

But Lady Lucia glanced at her sideways before answering, with slightly raised eyebrows, making an amused enquiring little mouth.

"Well, for example, rather conspicuously

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your own tall villa, my dear, if it comes to that."

This answer brought Frances Copley sharply upright, flushed and distressed, the Charlie Montagu episode seeming to jump out at her in all its concentrated unpleasantness.

"Ah! no, Lucia, that's hardly fair," she protested, too much taken by surprise to dissimulate her hurt. "I did not go to the tall villa to please myself and find opportunity for running rigs—as you not very elegantly put it—but simply to economise, to save money in plain English, and avoid debt."

"I know, everybody knows, my dearest. Why should you defend yourself? You were superb, simply heroic. I was, and am, on my knees to you about all that. Good patience, Fan, you can't seriously imagine I'm such a beast as to mean *you,* with all your angelic sweetness and goodness, in what I just now said?"

"Who else, then?" Frances asked, still too flushed, too harassed by self-reproach, to appreciate the copious libation of cousinly affection and admiration poured forth so generously at her feet.

Lady Lucia hesitated before answering. It

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wasn't like Frances to be so touchy, so quick to resent a quite imaginary slight!

"But surely you must have heard the rather pre-historic Oxley story," she said, "which incidentally transferred the title and estates to our branch of the Cowdens? Of course it was a frightful scandal at the time and made no end of talk. Not that I can be expected to lament it though, since it brought our grandfather—yours and mine—Napworth and all the rest of the property. Billy"—Lady Lucia's brother, as it may be explained, the present Lord Oxley—"who, as you know, is perfectly crazy on family history, raked up the whole thing when we heard you were leaving Grosvenor Square. It's one of his favourite legends. He proposed writing to you about it. But I would not let him. I took for granted you knew all you cared to know; and I didn't see why you should be bothered with letters on the subject when you'd more than enough on your hands, poor darling, already."

Mrs. Copley sat down on the coping of the wall again. She could not but reflect that her rest-cure must be far from complete since her nerves showed themselves so singularly on edge. She felt quite ashamed. It was too

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silly to get rattled and give herself away like this! And it was more than silly, inexcusable —she told herself—nothing short of that, to have anything approaching a tiff with poor precious little Lucia, so large-eyed and pinch-faced, under her brave cerise-coloured parasol arrayed in those suggestively voluminous mauve draperies. Consequently Frances had but a single purpose in mind, at this moment, that of apology, of gently and sufficiently making her peace.

"No," she said humbly, "I am afraid I must confess to an ignorance of family history, which would rule me forever out of Billy's good books. I have never heard the pre-historic Oxley or any other story about the tall villa. My mother never talked to me about her affairs; and I didn't even know of the existence of the house until after her death, when I had to go into business matters with our lawyers."

She leaned forward, coaxingly laying her hand on her companion's knee.

"Forgive me if I seemed cross just now, Lucia darling," she very prettily pleaded. "The sun and the long drive"—she might have added Lady Bulparc's unceasing conversation—"have given me a tiresome headache.

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I feel rather to pieces, I'm sure I don't know why. So both to show you forgive me and to save my reputation with Billy, tell me the Oxley story from start to finish. I should simply love to hear it."

But as the story, with confusingly digressive quirks and flourishes on Lady Lucia's part, did get itself told, Frances Copley found herself but very doubtfully loving it. For, during its progress, the wind of discomfort sensibly backed to that former disconcerting quarter and blew on her searchingly; chill with the strangest of suggestions, strangest of —were they not?—provocations, until she shivered for all the warmth of the summer evening and peaceful loveliness outspread before her.

"You see our grandfather was the child of that Lord Oxley's distant cousin," Lady Lucia explained, in the course of her narrative; "quite a tiny child, of course, at the time it all happened. But there were no other boys in either family, only the usual cohorts of superfluous daughters. And, my dear, don't be shocked, but Billy says the tall villa, conveniently tucked away on the edge of the London of that period, was just young Lord Oxley's *nid d'amour*. Either he bought

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it directly it was built, or had it built expressly for this Mrs. Cressidy with whom, as I tell you, he was so madly infatuated. Owing to that unlucky shortage of boys, Lord Bulparc naturally was wild Oxley should marry early, some girl in his own world, and secure the succession to their branch of the family—heirs male, don't you know, as many of them and as quickly as possible. But he simply wouldn't look at any other woman. La Cressidy must have held him to an extraordinary degree—though Billy, after his investigation of letters and papers and so on, doesn't scruple to describe her as a regular wrong'un. She was too deeply dipped to be able to get a divorce, and several years older than Oxley into the bargain; and throughout her spirited adventures—they appear to have been many—never had had any children. So there they both were, you see, hopelessly blocked in every direction. Exactly what brought about the final catastrophe, Billy fails to trace out so far. But either Lord Bulparc made a successful appeal to her cupidity, bought La Cressidy off in short; or she just grew tired of Lord Oxley and his too great devotion, for she vanished one fine

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morning in company, as was proved, with one of her former lovers."

"And he—Oxley?" Frances Copley asked, after a little pause, looking down at her hands very tightly clasped in her lap.

"Oh, well, Billy considers him a cowardly idiot; but I don't share that view of his conduct. It was wrong, of course, still it seems to me rather exquisite. The men of our generation don't err on the side of desperation in their affairs of the heart.—He could not make up his mind to live without her."

"And so—shot himself," Frances said, very softly.

"That I can't tell you. Billy refused to give me the details. He says they are rather revolting—and, don't you know, it is not quite wise perhaps to let one's mind dwell upon what is horrible under—under certain circumstances."

She bent forward, and with her handkerchief swept the scattered crumbs off the top of the wall on to the water, where the circling swans bowed their proud heads, greedily slushing them up.

"But no doubt he will be only too delighted to give you chapter and verse," she added, "regarding the whole treasured transaction if

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you care to ask him. He comes back from Scotland, you know, next week."

Frances shook her head, still keeping her eyes fixed on her clasped hands.

"No," she said, "I don't think I do, perhaps, care to ask him."

She slipped from her seat on the coping, to her feet, and stood there; but swayed a little, for her knees gave under her so that she was forced to steady herself by leaning against the low wall. Perceiving which Lady Lucia called out in alarm—

"Frances, Frances, darling, what is it? You look so ghastly pale. Are you faint?"

And bundling down off her perch, she put her arm round her cousin's waist with the instinct of rendering her support.

"Nothing—indeed nothing," Mrs. Copley rather wanly protested. "I shall be all right directly. You must not exert yourself. I am only ridiculously tired. Really it's too foolish. I must have got a touch of sun when I was driving this afternoon, I think—or at Filmers, in the walled garden more likely. It was roasting hot there and I'd forgotten my sunshade. I'll go indoors and rest in my room until it's time to dress for dinner."

Midway in their progress homeward, across

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the lawns, the two ladies stopped, caught in a sudden wide flung splendour of sunset. Beneath giant oaks and Spanish chestnuts, and through beds of bracken bathed in ruddy light, the herd of deer, with swinging antlers, and dainty mincing tread, streamed down to the lake-side to drink. Above its gardens and grey terrace, the southern front of the great house rose into a sky of carmine and of gold; while around roofs, turrets and chimneys, a whirling multitude of swifts and martins, black against that immense radiance, rushed in the fine madness of their evening flight.

"How heavenly, how wonderful! All the world's on fire," Lady Lucia cried. "But it's a little creepy, too, for it seems to take one out of oneself and away into—well, I don't quite know what, as if one's soul swung loose from one's body somehow."

And, as seeking protection rather than rendering help, her arm tightened about her companion's waist. But Frances Copley made no direct response either to the words spoken or to that clinging affectionate clasp. Her mothlike eyes continued to search the sunset glory, singularly blank of expression and distrait.

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"Does any painting or miniature exist of that Lord Oxley?" she presently and rather inconsequently said.

"Oh!—of Alexis—La Cressidy's Oxley, you mean? No, none. By the way I forgot to tell you about that. It appears—I quote Billy's researches—he was tall and well made, and awfully particular about his clothes, had a remarkably fine figure; but, poor dear, an equally remarkably plain face. Was so ugly a man, indeed, that he never permitted any portrait to be painted of him. I dare say he really wasn't half as ugly as he imagined. But he seems, if Billy's to be trusted, to have had a perfect craze on the subject of his own looks. It's fearfully pathetic, don't you think; and so unlike most men, who consider themselves Adonises even when they are the most obvious frights. I confess, to me, it's all the more touching because he dressed so well. That was just decent pride, tremendous self-respect, for he simply hated his own face."

Pleading fatigue, Mrs. Copley appeared neither at dinner that night nor at breakfast next morning. Although ill disposed to sleep, bed still seemed to offer the securest shelter obtainable against the wind of discom-

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fort which so unmercifully buffeted her. To endure those buffetings in public, yet avoid self-betrayal, was beyond her power at this juncture.

For here, once again, negativing every denial and putting scepticism to the blush, the supernatural, and the incalculable issues which —as she was clever enough to perceive—it inevitably raises, confronted her. To twist or wriggle away from that confrontation was useless. Lady Lucia's chapter of family history confirmed the truth of that which Frances had herself witnessed. What she had witnessed confirmed the truth of Lady Lucia's narrative. The two fitted into one another with a rather horrible neatness. She had, as she reflected, in the first place pursued indications and solicited disclosures; and, whatever her subsequent fluctuations of belief or encouragement of convenient doubtings, she was now compelled, by unimpeachable evidence, to admit that they had been granted her in no stinted measure. For the oft-quoted "long arm of coincidence" really was not long enough to cover this case, inordinately as she might stretch it.—Thus, placing fact beside fact, impression beside reported record during the watches of the sum-

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mer night, she recognised only too forcibly.

What must she do then?—By the time the dawn broke, mere feelings had trooped off in a feverish crowd, fear leading them; while that single question emerged, vital and paramount, calling aloud on her tenderness, her breeding, her sense of honour.

"For, since it is true, how can I stand aside and let this misery go on indefinitely?" Frances indignantly wailed, thereby rising to a higher, more general and generous view of the amazing predicament in which she was planted. "To let it go on, now that I know, would be wrong, contemptibly cruel and callous if his sad coming back can, by any means, be prevented. Just that is what I have to do—put a stop to it somehow."

And, on this, a lull in the wind of discomfort followed; appeasement and calm descending upon her, so that she slept until her maid —pink-cheeked and trim-waisted—arrived, bringing her morning tea and her letters.

Among these was one from Morris, written at sea and posted on landing at the Peruvian port of Mollendo. Self-confident and self-centred, mightily entertained and entertaining, the young man wrote in the finest spirits, leaving no doubt in the mind of his reader

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that in his case, at all events, all was very much for the best in this best of all possible worlds. Here and there, thrown in as sauce to a dish of otherwise unqualified egoism, she found a phrase regarding herself, hope that her country visits proved a success, that she was in good health, and so forth and so on. Upon these rather perfunctory concessions to the marital situation, her instinctive comment was—

"How little he really misses me, how little he really cares! Of course it's charming of him to throw dust in my eyes and his own—and he does throw it ever so nicely—yet wasn't I wise in my generation when I refused to go with him, since he's evidently so royally happy without me?"

And then, lying in the cool fragrance of the great comely bed-chamber, the dear beauty of Napworth looking in on her through wide open windows, Frances' thought returned to the man who, so tragically, sacrificed enjoyment of this beauty, sacrificed his claim to this splendid inheritance, sacrificed life itself for love of a woman—and, alas, a but worthless woman at that!—Morris Copley's attitude, as revealed in his letter, and the attitude of her unhappy kinsman, with his handsome person

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and his—to himself—unpardonably unhandsome countenance—and here a little shudder plucked queerly at Frances' jaw and rippled down her spine—offered assuredly a most moving contrast! To be loved, as Alexis, Lord Oxley, had known how to love and as Morris so conspicuously didn't, what a blessed gift for any woman to receive! Rightly understood, rightly met, wasn't it a career in itself, and of the most inspiring, most enchanting?

Tears smarted in her eyes.

"And his reward," she said half aloud, once more in imagination beholding that impalpable and faceless being, seated in the gilt armchair in the drawing-room of the tall villa, "his horrible, his unspeakable reward!"

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CHAPTER V

HAVING attained this height of romantic compassion Mrs. Copley proceeded, as the current phrase has it, to dig herself in.

To ordinary lungs the atmosphere at so extreme an elevation of sentiment might well prove too rarefied for sojourn save of the briefest. Such, thanks to the vein of eccentricity and extravagance Lady Bulparc so loudly deplored in her, was not Frances' experience. On the contrary, the mountain top once reached, she drew in strength of purpose and clearer discernment with every breath.

The path, leading to those inspiring altitudes, she frankly admitted far from easy or, at moments, agreeable to tread. She had been quite terribly frightened. She did not attempt to minimise the chances of terror awaiting her in the future. Yet, as she exultantly told herself, she had veritably arrived. She had forced discovery. At last she understood. Her whole perplexing relation to the tall villa—what it asked from her,

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what in return it had to give—was explained, and henceforth ranged itself falling into intelligible sequence and place. From the first she had felt it promised to work for independence and inward emancipation, for the quickening of her spiritual, her personal life. And so it quite divinely did, though through means and to ends hitherto undreamed of.

Self-reproach ceased to vex her. She, indeed, swept aside the very solid, florid person of the financier, Charlie Montagu, and all he might be reckoned to stand for in her present situation, with the lightest, the airiest touch. For, in her new-found singleness of vision and of intention, she became unscrupulous respecting secondary issues, as is the not infrequent habit of your idealist and devotee.

And as a devotee, a gentle implacable fanatic, Frances Copley showed herself in this hour of the blossoming of her soul and—shall it be added?—of her heart. As she saw it, a call had come to her, in and by herself, electing, selecting her, to which it was not only a matter of private honour but of high privilege to respond. As she lay, delicately at her ease, in her bed-chamber throughout the long still hours of the summer morning, she meditated with almost passionate content upon

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the finely personal character of that call. She alone had heard, she alone had seen, upon the two occasions when, in the drawing-room of the tall villa, the supernatural had, so to say, broken through. Morris and Montagu, alike, felt the chill accompanying that attempted manifestation, but nothing more. So it belonged to her, and to her alone, to meet and to deal with.

At that, Frances Copley raised herself against the fine white pillows, and turning her head to let her eyes dwell upon the lawns and radiant gardens, the dark wide-spreading cedars, the gleaming lake in the hollow, and peaceful uplands of the park, sleeping in the steady September sunshine beyond. So doing, the fair glory of the material world very present to her, she dedicated herself, consciously, voluntarily, to the help and succour of a being earth-bound yet unmaterial, the ghost of a true lover, her kinsman and, in a sense, her guest. As he had—thus she now figured it—trusted her, appealed to and claimed her, she would bend every energy, expend her imagination, her sympathy, to the setting free of his unhappy spirit.

How this was to be accomplished, what pain and effort it might cost her, she could

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form at present no idea. But she had faith. Ways and means would declare themselves in due time.—Now she just gave herself, without faltering and without reserve.

This excursion into emotional superlatives reacted upon Mrs. Copley's physical condition with the most engaging results, conferring unaccustomed bloom on her complexion, soft brightness to her mothlike eyes and graceful buoyancy to all her movements.

So notably was it the case that, when—emerging from her temporary seclusion—she joined the family circle at luncheon, Lord Bulparc genially chaffed and rallied her upon her radiant looks, adding a kiss of a warmth and gallantry not, perhaps, strictly avuncular. Her aunt remarked, meanwhile, for the benefit of the assembled company, men servants included, that—

"All the fuss about Fanny's headache last night really seemed rather ridiculous, since she was evidently so remarkably well to-day."

Lady Lucia took a less superficial view, the temperature of her affectionate curiosity mounting—though she abstained from direct questioning or comment—to close on boiling point. She knew Frances had received let-

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ters from the South American traveller by the early post, but—

"Surely, darling thing, Frances couldn't care for Morris Copley to *that* extent at this very mature time of day! She really looked too wonderfully sweet for words. It was too extraordinary. Was it possible that there could be anybody else, don't you know?"

Leaving her husband out of the question, there was one thing for which Mrs. Copley most emphatically did not care, just now—namely the prospect of meeting Lady Lucia's oft-quoted brother, the existent Lord Oxley.

She foresaw he would, in the interests of his cherished studies in family history, infallibly put her through the longer catechism in respect of the tall villa.

That thought was odious. For Lord Oxley, though an unusually estimable young man in every relation of life, was not overburdened with tact. He butted and bored at any subject dear to him, totally unconscious of the wearisome effect such buttings and borings might produce on his auditors. That any matter intimately touching herself should be thus clumsily exploited would, Frances felt, be nothing short of torment. Simply she could not bear it. Under stress of his expo-

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sition and cross-questioning might she not, only too likely, betray herself, letting drop some hint of her sacred and amazing secret? To betray herself, to that well-intentioned but tedious young nobleman, would be humiliating enough in all conscience; but to betray her tragic, spectral visitant would, as she saw it, be an act of the grossest, most unpardonable treachery. She was very jealous for him; jealous of the trust which, as she exaltedly believed, he had placed in her. She felt an immense and exquisite tenderness towards him, which brought a sob to her throat. Conceive, then, the anguish, the insult, of Billy blurting out—couldn't she hear his loud unmodulated tones, so unfortunately resembling those of his mother, Lady Bulparc—

"But, by Jove, my dear Frances, you don't mean seriously to tell me that you're under the impression my discreditable namesake actually *walks?*"

To avoid all possibility of so painful an exposure, Mrs. Copley decided, then and there, to advance the date of the only other visit she had in mind to pay before her return to town; and thus find an excuse for leaving Napworth while the beneficent peace of the dear place was still unendangered by the ar-

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rival of its all too enquiring heir apparent.

The visit in question was of yearly autumnal occurrence. Never since her marriage—not even during the most crowded period of her husband's prosperity—had she omitted to spend ten days or a fortnight at Stourmouth, with her god-mother, Mrs. Allenby-Knox—a wonderful old woman, ripe in knowledge of men and of affairs, whose apparently inexhaustible fund of anecdote covered the better part of three generations of all which was most salient in the world of politics and of society. Her husband had enjoyed a long and respected parliamentary career as member, first of Lord Bulparc's pocket borough of Marychurch and later, after the passing of the Reform Bill, for the Marychurch Division of South Hants. To consolidate his connection with his faithful constituency, he bought land and built a comfortable, dignified house among the pines and heather of the East Cliff at Stourmouth—at a time when that now sprawling and tripper-ridden watering place, could still boast a socially select, if geographically rather circumscribed, infancy.

Here, giving up London, his widow elected to settle when, death claiming him, the House of Commons knew Mr. Allenby-Knox no

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more. And here, upon leaving Napworth, Frances Copley came to pay her yearly tribute of affectionate admiration and regard.

If her uncle's house offered her a rest-cure, her god-mother's offered her something little short of a retreat—in the technical acceptation of that term. Allenby Lodge sheltered no other guest; and its aged autocratic owner did not come fully to life until comparatively late each afternoon.

With all the freedom and leisure this arrangement secured her, Frances had no quarrel. Her secret, and a deepening assurance of her vocation in relation to it, lay warm against her heart. She welcomed this space in which to take breath, to review the situation, and mature her plan of campaign. If it is possible for a human creature to be perfectly happy, Frances Copley was, I firmly believe, perfectly happy at this time. Through those still, sunny autumn days by the sea, she walked as on air. Romance enfolded her,—romance just sufficiently shot with fear to be tonic rather than enervating—since, for some strange deep-seated reason, bliss lacks savour unless seasoned with just a whiff of pain. Her enthusiasm, her sense of a call to high endeavour, stood at the flood.

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And then, when she least looked for it, Mrs. Allenby-Knox, of all people, unwittingly echoed that call, gave that enthusiasm a reinforcing shake.

It fell out thus. The conversation during dinner circled round modern feminine standards, apropos of some recently reported demonstration of a peculiarly aggressive type by a band of militant suffragettes. The whole movement was condemned by the handsome old lady, root and branch, and that with a rich flavour of contempt.

"Believe me, they are wrong, my dear Fanny, wrong from the very start. Woman's strength, like her office, is not collective but individual," and she punctuated the assertion with an impish laugh.

"And what, then, is woman's office?" Frances, willing to humour her, asked.

"The subjugation of man.—To accomplish it she must act it singly, not in battalions; and for the simple reason that, in the mass, we are not beautiful. In the mass neither face, figure, nor clothes tell. A flock of sheep, a herd of cows, is more harmonious and therefore more grateful to the eye than any human crowd, especially an excited feminine one. And by beauty alone—let us be honest—is

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man swayed, overcome, reduced to his proper attitude of obedience. All other claims fail —wit, learning, talents, accomplishments, even money itself. Beauty is paramount."

And as Frances essayed to combat these rather cynical statements, her friend was quick to turn on her with examples from history both public and private.

"Nay," she said at last, "I need go no further than your own family, my dear, in support of my contention. Think of that famous beauty of my earliest youth—Flora Cressidy."

Mrs. Copley had some ado to control a start and the little cry which threatened to accompany it.

"I can just remember—as a baby of five or six—seeing her laboriously drawn, in a bath-chair, along what it is now the very vulgar fashion to call 'the front' at Brighton. By then she had become a mountain of fat, being one of those small-boned women, noted for their little hands and feet, who after forty-five, do grow inordinately stout. The legend of her beauty survived, however, as well as that of the indiscretions which earlier rendered her notorious. People would point her out to one another—my nurse did to my nursery-maid, I remember, and snubbed me severely

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with 'a person who no good little girls ask questions about' when I made some innocent enquiry. Yes—pointed her out, but by that time, poor woman, with something of a wink. Man after man, and they by no means of the commoner order, had wrecked themselves for her. To cite a member of your own family, as I just now said—think of the thousands poor Oxley squandered on her——"

The surface of the dinner table shifted oddly to Frances Copley's sight. The dessert service, flowers, decanters, glasses and fruit performed the weirdest little dance over the white cloth and then slowly settled back into place.

"Lord Oxley?" she just managed to pronounce.

"Yes, Alexis Lord Oxley—an excellent fellow with abilities above the average, and a rare *flair* for politics. He sat for Harchester—was expected to make a distinct mark and be included in the next Conservative Government. . . . I have often heard my father speak of the loss he was to the party. . . . Instead of which he died miserably by his own hand. Was found in the garden of some house in the St. John's Wood district where he kept her, with half his face blown away—so the story

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ran—because beautiful Flora Cressidy had run off from him."

The elder lady continued to develop and illustrate her original theme. But it is to be feared Mrs. Copley failed to follow her arguments. Lucia FitzGibbon had told her the details of that suicide were revolting—too unwholesomely so for her brother to repeat. Now Mrs. Copley knowing the how and where of them found her bliss—for it still very strangely subsisted—more than ever seasoned to fulness of perfection by pain.

But, even as she led her hostess out of the dining-room a few minutes later on her arm, she realised that the period of preparation had reached its term. The days of her retreat were numbered. The sunshine, leisure, freedom of them already palled on her. She grew restless for action, for the practical initiation of her amazing campaign. Suddenly time pressed—for, when she came to consider, if it were to be successful, must not that campaign be finished, over and done with, before Morris, borne on an ever-broadening stream of opulence, came back? Hence her departure from Stourmouth, like that from Napworth, was a little precipitate.

In London she found autumn had preceded

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her, had hurried—taking time by the forelock. During the long drive from Waterloo, north-westward, the town struck her as looking curiously out-at-elbows, devoid of dignity and of style. Rules of traffic were relaxed—and the populace—such as showed of it—leaving the pavements, meandered at its ease along the middle of the streets. In the parks, elm and chestnut leaves fluttered down on to the scorched grass, upon which dusty figures lay at full length wrapped in graceless sleep, and across which little troops of tired children aimlessly trailed.

Looking out of the window of her laden taxi, Frances received an impression of all-pervading dilapidation, of litter, of waste paper, of not water enough to wash with or air enough to breathe. Formerly she would have recoiled in fastidious disgust. Now she only felt pitiful, pitiful exceedingly. For what fate, as she reflected, could be more cruel than to be held captive to so squalid a world as this one immediately visible, by the evil spell of poverty when living; save that of being compelled, unnaturally, recurrently, to revisit it when dead?

And her thought flew forward, with a splendour of tenderness, to the tall villa and to

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Alexis, Lord Oxley, whose soul, twentieth century science and general modernity notwithstanding, was, as she believed, held there in thrall.

Yet when the much desired tall villa—its rows of narrow windows, fluted pilasters and other over-decorative adjuncts—came into view, as the cab passed before it and turning the corner drew up at the iron gate in the side street, Frances Copley experienced a revulsion of feeling. For, after the serene and happy grandeur of Napworth and quiet dignity of Allenby Lodge, this house did, it must be conceded, look most terribly rococo, its flimsy pretentiousness quite glaringly pronounced. That it could ever have harboured —still more, did now actually harbour—treasures of pathos and romance, absent from those far superior dwelling-places, strained belief. Behind its would-be elegance, moreover, she seemed to detect a grimacing smirk, as though it mocked her high-souled fervour.

Nor were other elements in her reception lacking to give colour to such doubts.

Owing to the earlier date of her arrival, her cook and parlour-maid were still absent. Hence the police constable—husband of the formidably respectable care-taking wife—be-

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ing off duty, shorn of the official dignities of helmet, tunic and belt, amiably ran out in shirt-sleeves and carpet slippers, to help unload and transport her luggage. His build and expression were those of a colossal, serious-minded small boy, fresh complexioned and innocent of guile—a really virtuous small boy, could so miraculous a human product by chance exist. Anyone further removed from dark extra-mundane influences, from things occult and the super-normal, it would, as Frances ruefully told herself, be difficult to conceive. If she required an insulator, a non-conductor, it was superfluous to look further. She had the genuine article, and in prime working order, too, right here under her hand.

But an insulator, a non-conductor, was, unfortunately, of all things precisely that which she least required or least desired; and its presence depressed her, adding to the general sense of disappointment under which she laboured. She had counted upon some sign, some leading, which, in this hour of her return, would set a seal upon her strange enterprise. But none was vouchsafed her; so that recalling the exalted happiness of the last ten days, the present affected her as a rather cruel anti-climax.

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So sharply, indeed, did it let her down that she lingered aimlessly in the little square garden, before finding sufficient energy and resolution to follow her maid and the policeman, carrying the last of her bags and baggage into the house.

On either side the steps of the portico the foolish stone lions pranced in their eternally arrested game of ball. Half-blown roses, withering upon their stems, dotted the bushes in the oval bed surrounding the sundial. Upon the soil, grey and cracked from drought, the privet hedge rained soot-encrusted leaves. A dun-coloured mist, wherein the dust of the streets hung as in solution, covered the houses in the near distance and the half bare trees along the canal bank. It covered the sky, too, almost to the zenith. Through it the sun sullenly glared—an angry, tarnished, vermilion disk, as magnified in size as it was deficient in clarity and nobility of light.

The taxi-driver cranked up his engine, swung his car round and out into the main road, amid a volley of petulant tootings. A lean black cat, long in the leg and flabby in the barrel, leapt from the coping of the dwarf wall to the top of the railings. Clung there a minute its alert head raised, as it surveyed

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the prospect with hungry yellow eyes, dropped to the ground and slunk off beneath the sooty shrubs. Somewhere, out at the back, a child explosively cried and milk-cans clanged and shattered. The voice of distant trains and traffic swelled and sank away, as though choked and muted by the weight of the dust-laden atmosphere.

And Frances Copley, a delicate very up-to-date figure, in light, straight-cut Shantung travelling coat, and white hat swathed in a voluminous pearl-pink motor veil, stood on the flagged pathway below the dining-room windows, seeing all, hearing all, gauging to its last word the inherent commonness and cheapness of the scene. Her lips, for once, took a bitter line. For was it, she asked herself, possible this could stand for prelude to any supreme act of devotion, supreme achievement, especially upon the moral and spiritual plane?

Failure had, in the past, not infrequently, been her portion. What guarantee had she the present would prove more kind; and that she should, this time, succeed and attain? Was not the whole precious undertaking presumptuous on her part, compact of ambitious vanity? And, worse still, was not the whole undertaking based, only too probably, upon a de-

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lusion? Not a delusion as to the fact of Alexis, Lord Oxley's infatuation and suicide. . . . These she accepted as too well attested to admit of doubt. . . . But as to the after consequences of that infatuation and suicide, to which she and she alone could bear witness? To his "walking," as her cousin Billy, Lord Oxley, would crudely phrase it; to his "haunting"—the word was so wretchedly banal, so vulgar, it hurt her!—this same very rococo, amirking tall villa, at the present day?

Thus did the blight of scepticism, of disbelief in herself and in the object of her self-dedication, again descend upon Frances Copley. It shrivelled her inward happiness and sweet enthusiasm, even as the drought and dust of London shrivelled the autumn leaves.

Other sounds had, just now, fallen silent, so that she could hear the dry rustle of those leaves, as a faint draught of air from the east detached them from the blackened twigs and branches, and drove them down in an arid shower upon the pavement upon the opposite side of the road. Surely they whispered, in the blank meagre tones, of failure such as she dreaded and as her heart so desolately prevised?

The garden of the tall villa, even in the ex-

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isting autumnal off-season and general out-of-townedness, did not lend itself to prolonged occupation. It was at once quite too public and too circumscribed a spot. To dawdle there would be absurd. Of this Frances Copley, notwithstanding her inward distraction, presently became conscious and it flustered her slightly. She glanced instinctively up at the range of drawing-room windows with an uncomfortable suspicion of being criticised and watched. And, with that, it occurred to her how often Flora Cressidy, whose loveliness had been so many gallant gentlemen's undoing—according to wonderful old Mrs. Allenby-Knox—must have looked out from those same drawing-room windows at this same little square garden below. Couldn't she imagine the exquisite treacherous woman, holding aside the lace curtains, and gazing down at her—Frances Copley—in mingled amusement and—was it?—challenge, actually now.

The impression, a singularly vivid and living one, stung her pride and gave new vigour and direction to her thought. For the first time Mrs. Cressidy entered into the affair, somehow, as an element actively to be reckoned with. Whereupon Frances was shaken by anger altogether concrete and human.

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Scepticism, self-distrust, fear of delusion, were swept under by it. Righteous indignation overflowed in her; and, not impossibly, some of that natural antagonism of woman towards woman where a man is the prize of the fight. Dear, gentle, sweet Frances Copley squared up to her adversary, her fists clenched and her sleeves, so to speak, rolled up. In other words, she walked up the steps between the prancing lions, her graceful head carried high, and passed, without further hesitation or tremor, into the house.

Upon the table in the inner hall lay a pile of letters and other postal matter, flanked by a sheaf of lilium auratum, prize flowers of superb quality and growth. The scent of them filled the hall and well of the staircase, hanging dense and heavy in the close dry air. Pinned on the paper enfolding their long woody stems, Mrs. Copley saw a man's visiting card bearing the inscription—"With compliments, hearing you are due home to-day. Hope to call shortly. Sincerely C. M."—scrawled in pencil.

Reading which Frances' anger, far from being appeased, took an even sharper edge. Small wonder the tall villa grimacingly smirked if this was the greeting it held in store

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for her! Montagu had just been lying in wait, spying upon her return, ready to prosecute his unwelcome attentions directly she was again unprotected by her own people, and alone! The man and his gigantic lilies were alike suffocating. Tears of mortification smarted in her eyes. The position was so vulgarised, so unpardonably lowered by his immediate intrusion—gift in hand, too! Flowers? Yes, but so evidently ordered at a florist's, as though those from his own much vaunted garden weren't undesired enough! What would he advise himself to offer her next?—Jewels, diamonds? Or would his advances take the rudimentary form of a cheque? Frances piled on the conceivable atrocity and offence. She was furious.

Bundling up the pile of letters in both hands and scornfully leaving the lilies where they lay, she went into her husband's library, opening off the hall. She could not face the drawing-room—that Mecca of all her aspirations, of all her devotions during the last strangely exalted and happy weeks—just yet. She must master her anger and arrive at a more dignified and peaceful frame of mind first. How could she bring any degree of comfort and tranquillity to another, when in

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such a tumult of feeling herself? How present the calm, the receptive attitude, which is necessary to any manifestation from across the gulf of physical death?

The library was sober in colouring and nobly furnished. For Morris—by what right it would be difficult to pronounce—had found means to convey to it all the choicest pieces, pictures, books, bronzes, from his own special quarters in Grosvenor Square. This was, as Frances all along had felt, a proceeding little short of fraudulent. But he had carried it through with his usual brilliant plausibility and bluff. The result she admitted was as delightful—Morris's taste in such matters being excellent—as undefensible. The room had none of the faded elegance or affected candour of the rest of the house; but a ripe privacy and repose.

Oh! Morris knew how to do himself well, no faintest question as to that!—so she reflected, as she sank into one of the deep-seated leather chairs and began to open her letters.

The first of these was from Morris himself.

"Business is humming, simply and most extensively humming," he wrote. "I will not inflict wearisome details upon you; but ask you to take it for said that all is well, beyond my

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fondest hopes and expectations, as to the fundamental worth of this property. The lode is remarkably rich and apparently inexhaustible in quantity. Only—there is always an only in this wicked world, is there not?—if we are to get full value out of it, matters must be personally conducted for some time longer. To delegate authority would be to lay oneself open to all manner of delays and malpractices. Rascals, of every nationality and colour under the sun, swarm here ready to swindle you at every turn. I have written fully to Montagu. I do not feel it would be fair by him, let alone by ourselves, to leave things in the hands of a manager at present. Either he, Montagu, or I ought unquestionably to be here on the spot. His want of knowledge of Spanish would be a vicious handicap; and in some other respects, I cannot honestly pretend he is fitted for the job. Rather soft and overcivilised (in not quite the highest sense of the word)—a financier not a pioneer, and it is that last which is required out here. Cut off from his habits and comforts he would be a miserable man and probably a pretty sick one. . . . All of which, my dear Fan, points to the unpleasing conclusion that I am bound to stay on for another three to six months. I hate

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being away from you for so long; but with a general 'restitution of all things' within my grasp, you can understand I naturally fight shy of the notion of leaving my work half done and so running great risk of a fiasco. You are always so unselfish and reasonable that I feel sure you will enter into my difficulties and see how I am placed. . . .

"For the rest, I am as right as rain—in first-class condition, and on good terms with man and beast. I get on extremely well with these Spanish Americans, those, I mean, of the upper classes. They are real sportsmen, with plenty of temperament and a surprising amount of tradition—a fine flourish of courtesy and manner, too, which pleases me. The women are superb—if you admire the Goya type. I do—not that I see very much of them. It is singular what a tremendous mark the Moors—that Arab civilisation—has left on Spain, even Spain transported half across the world and that for many generations. There is more than a hint of the harem, even to-day, about the way these new-world colonials regard and treat their women folk. Probably they know their own business best. I could imagine the ladies by nature amorous, easily inflammable. They produce families, any-

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how, on the patriarchal scale—positive broods. President Roosevelt can make himself easy on the score of race suicide south of Panama. The children are the most engaging little velvet-eyed beggars, too. I stayed in a country house near here last week—a big hacienda literally packed with them, of all ages and sizes from a babe a span long upwards; so I have seen Spanish American home life at close quarters. Indeed it has charm. At moments I felt downright envious of my host. The patriarchal stunt had me, in short; so that it struck me as a rather pointless proceeding to spend oneself in piling up money with no fruit of one's loins to inherit and make play with one's riches in the future. . . . It is a little hard on us, my dear Fan, is it not? I never quite make out how far you really mind; but, as I grow older, my regret does not lessen. To have no stake in the younger generation is bad for a man—inclines him to recklessness. One swings too loose. Honestly I feel it——"

Frances Copley read no further.

She closed her eyes. Her face grew very white. She let her hands, and the letter they held, drop in her lap. Morris had never reproached her before; and this amounted to reproach, if indirect still scathing. It cut her to

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the quick. Her poor heart bled, seeming to empty itself drop by drop, until she grew faint with the drain of it.

Perhaps she was illogical; still she did very certainly suffer. She might, often did, distrust her husband and disapprove his doings. She was not in love with him, it is true. Whether she ever had been so may be doubted. But she admired his cleverness, his gaily dazzling personality. Was pleased and touched—often against her better judgment—when he paid her little lover-like attentions, noticed and praised what she wore, looked or said. Morris had become a habit, in fine, though a habit she found herself disposed to call a bad one sometimes, a habit against which she rebelled, even tried to break herself of. But to have the habit round on and break her was as unexpected as it seemed cruel. . . . Not that she felt angry now. It went too deep for that. She bled inwardly under the immense humiliation of it.

The more so that Morris was, in some sort, within his rights. Thinking of those prolific new-world Southern women and their extensive progeny, must she not admit herself a failure? As a wife she had not fulfilled her half of the contract in its material, primitive

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aspects. She granted that. Only Morris need not, surely, have so clearly dotted the i's and crossed the t's? It was ungenerous, specially ungenerous to suggest she did not "really mind."

"Really mind!—really mind!"

The tears ran out of Frances Copley's closed eyes and down her white cheeks, and her lips quivered. For, to her, a depth of accusation resided in those words thus applied. Her fastidiousness, her refinement, her too delicate sense of humour, her too good-breeding were arraigned in those two words and condemned. Morris had grown tired of these things in her. They hampered him. He pulled at the chain by which marriage bound him to her. At a distance, free to live his own life, he discovered he had no particular use for her any more—and not unskilfully told her so.

Which did not for an instant mean that he proposed to desert her. On the contrary, he would come back—when it suited him, sooner or later—pour money into her lap and bid her spend it with a lavish hand, satisfy her tastes and his love of the spectacular. Be the smartest of the smart. Multiply houses, servants, motor-cars, horses, patronise the arts,

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splendidly entertain. . . . Oh! she knew the whole gilt-edged programme by rote!

But if, by chance, when he came back, all these magnanimities were not required of him? If he did not find her? If she was herself no longer accessible—no longer here? . . .

Frances Copley stiffened in the luxurious arm-chair. Her tears ceased and her moth-like eyes opened wide, searching, searching, half terrified, half fascinated, by something she vaguely apprehended, vaguely inwardly saw.

The scent of Charlie Montagu's giant lilies filtered into the room, impregnating the air. The guileless, fresh-complexioned police constable, having finished his tea in company with his formidably respectable wife in the basement, was in act of carrying the last of the luggage upstairs. Frances heard the heavy tread of his large-slippered feet and the chippering accents of her maid, holding friendly converse with him, during his amiable if lengthy ascent.

These sounds, reaching her intelligence, awoke her from her trance, recalling her to things ordered and ordinary as from a great distance. Listening to them she regained, though not without struggle, the conscious

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control and direction of her will. She knew what she meant to do—or rather attempt to do, for it trenched on prodigy, on the miraculous. It was a song of degrees, moreover. It would take time and effort. The end was not yet. . . . Nor, in a sense, the beginning either —not, that is, to-night.

To-night must be given to rest, to the schooling of jarred nerves and of a troubled heart. Therefore she would deal very simply with herself. Would eat, and after dinner would go to bed; and there read herself calm, read herself absorbed and quiet till sleep came to her. A new book by Hewlett lay on the table at her elbow, its leaves still uncut. She had ordered it because, so she learned from reviews while at Stourmouth, it told of redemption, of the union of long-parted lovers; breathed of the open air and of flowers, and of the sweet freedom of untenanted spaces by valley and by down. That would suit her humour. She would read it, drench herself with the poetry, the fair words and images of it, until, please God, she slept.

To-morrow morning she would write certain duty letters. . . . One to dear little Lucia FitzGibbon, one to her late hostess, Mrs. Allenby-Knox; and one to Morris—that last

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must be delicately and bravely done—telling him not to hurry, to take his time and on no account to think of quitting South America until he could do so with a comfortable conviction business would not suffer from his absence. Having out his hand to this extremely profitable plough, let him by no means turn back on her account. She would write affectionately, ignoring—by even the most distant allusions—the matter which had so deeply pained her. For her will was good towards Morris, wholly good. She would assure him that she, for her part, was well and contented; that everyone had been delightful to her both at Napworth and Stourmouth, that both houses stood permanently open-doored should she elect to re-visit them at any moment.

To-morrow afternoon she would go out for a while, and walk in the dusty aridity of this autumnal London which was so new to her. She had never seen it before. It told strange stories, provoking wonder and pity. It meant much.

Then at five o'clock, and not till then, having made herself ready in body and in soul, she would enter the drawing-room, and—wait.

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CHAPTER VI

THE great cats were restless this evening and complained behind their prison bars. The moaning cough of a lion, presently swelling to the sombre splendour of his full-throated roar, was borne upon the fitful southeasterly wind. . . . A wind a little sinister in its dry warmth; the breath of it tainted by passage over miles of streets, miles of buildings, and the some millions of but indifferently washed humanity resident therein.

It bellied the lace curtains of an open window as Frances Copley, pushing apart the high narrow doors, came into the drawing-room; and snatching at the long "angel sleeves" of her grey tea-gown, sent them fluttering up from her shoulders like a pair of filmy wings. In an instant or so it fell dead again, or in any case withdrew itself otherwhere. The curtains dropped limply into place, and Frances' angel wings were folded —her sleeves hanging straight, the pointed

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ends of them brushing the ground on either side her clinging silken skirts.

She came a few steps forward, and remained for a while looking, listening, taking in—gently resolute—each detail of her surroundings. Everything was in place; yet the room seemed bare and unfriendly seen in the dull diffused evening light. Well, its unfriendliness must be conquered then—that was all. Sympathy and understanding must be re-established between herself and it. She had lost touch—she feared she might do so—owing, not only to absence, but to the larger knowledge she had gained, during that absence, of much which had formerly taken place here. There were new elements to be counted with, new impediments to be surmounted. And this represented a set-back to be met with patience, with imagination, and, above all, with a perfect sincerity of purpose. She must work.

Fortunately there was no longer need to hurry events, since Morris postponed his return from the silver-spouting Andes. And of work she wasn't afraid. Indeed she hailed it. Conquest is precious in proportion to the strain and stress it entails. . . . Once again that old story of a seasoning of pain needed

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for the perfecting of bliss. . . . She did not ask for a walk-over. For had she not unlimited treasure of patience, or any other virtue required, very much at the disposal of the tall villa? Was she not, in her present humour, prepared to woo that rather absurd and strangely secretive dwelling until, cajoled by her gracious importunity, it yielded up the last fraction of its mystery?

And there Frances rather tremulously smiled while, her hands clasped high on her bosom, she at last found tender courage to look at the gilt-framed, cane-seated arm-chair of amazing memories, set by the fireplace—calling it, in some sort, to witness both the strength and purity of her present intention.

The chair was empty. Not for an instant had she expected it to be otherwise than empty. Yet the sight of it tended to confirm her faith, to revive her finer devotion, thus awakening an echo at least of her earlier felicity. And in this she let herself thankfully rest, satisfied for the time being to ask nothing further.

Lightly and swiftly she moved back and closed the doors on to the gallery, shutting herself in with those dear echoes of her former delight. Crossed the room and closed the

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window also. For the wind began to torment the curtains again; while it brought on its tainted breath the renewed and tremendous complaint of the caged lion.

And that complaint Frances didn't wish to hear, finding it agitating as some voice of elemental protest, of elemental upheaval and danger. She dreaded agitations from without at this particular juncture, as threatening the detachment, the unruffled temper, in which spiritual enthusiasm blossoms and thrives. Against outside agitations of the vulgarer sort—Charlie Montagu to wit—she had already taken precautions. If she wanted anything she would ring. If anyone wanted her, they couldn't simply have her. She was not at home. Absolutely she received no guests. She had ascertained, moreover, to her relief, that innocent but possible mar-plot of an insulator, the police constable, was out of the house, away on duty and not due to return till morning.

In these elaborate provisions Frances took a subjective and, some may hold, slightly morbid pleasure, as in the style and finish of her dress. But both they and it were, in a manner, hieratic, part of a self-imposed ritual by which she sought fitly to approach the con-

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summation she had in view. Deeply, even bitterly in earnest, just on that very account, Frances Copley—being who and what she was—thus embroidered her theme, dallied, playing hide and seek with the sternness of her own purpose, and to that end multiplied modes of procedure on her way.

Safe now behind closed doors and windows, orders given which should effectually block intrusion from persons of normal flesh and blood, she sat down at the piano and gave herself to the weaving of dim-coloured pensive harmonies, such as her soul loved in music, in painting and in verse. She turned for refreshment to art—in which the atmosphere of Allenby Lodge and of dear Napworth, though each delicious according to its own fashion, was, it must be conceded, not a little deficient. And that invited refreshment proved great. It lightened effort and the strain of suspense. It softened the humiliation caused by her husband's letter. It extinguished her too lively awareness of the crudities and squalor of this autumnal London, stretching out on every side to the horizon, ugly and immense. It worked in her towards acquiescence in whatever might be destined to befall, an ac-

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quiescence making for clearness of vision and inward peace.

"Tout lasse, tout passe, tout casse," she told herself. "Yes, one sees—isn't it driven home on one only too sharply and perpetually?—that is so. Yet art remains—a secure and lovely refuge. A well in the desert, which never goes dry whatever the drought; and from which, having once drunk, one is blessedly at liberty to drink again, in one's need, whenever one may wish."

In this gracious frame of mind, tranquillised, freed from the tyrannies of time and place, Mrs. Copley continued. So that when, about half an hour later, the doors on to the gallery silently opened apparently of themselves, and as silently shut, she took the strange event calmly. A thrill of expectation and of triumph went through her, it is true, while, quietly turning her head, she looked into the great oval mirror set as the central panel in the wall on her left. In it, just perceptible through the mournful, now fading, evening light, she saw an upright shadow—that of a man tall in height—standing behind her. At the same time she felt a chill draught of air shiver her transparent drooping sleeves

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and stir the small stray curls upon the nape of her neck.

For some few seconds the shadow seemed to pause as though irresolute what direction to pursue. Then she saw it move forward and take up its station by the inward curve of the piano case facing her.

Frances' slender fingers played on, touching the keys softly mechanically; but her breath caught in short sighs. She could not control it, for it answered to a pain which clutched, like the opening and closing of a sharp, thin hand, at her heart. And she still looked into the mirror. She judged it safest so, till the pain ceased, and she had fuller mastery of her nerves, and of her muscles also. At present she knew herself to be incapable of intelligible speech. Knew further that although his coming crowned her dearest hopes with the promise of fruition, she must infallibly suffer a moment of mortal terror when first addressing her discarnate guest and looking him in the face. Rich in theory she had failed to discount the pangs of such a moment as yet. Now they threatened her as a rather horrible certainty close at hand. Her spirit might be, was indeed, fondly willing; but her poor flesh cried out its weakness. Neither

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compassion, nor romance, nor that ultimate design conceived after reading her husband's letter yesterday—as a method of release both for him and for herself—proved strong enough, so she sorrowfully recognised, to quell her natural revolt from commerce with this abnormal being, who so tragically had made the worst of both worlds, figuring before her as a deserter—though to her thinking an heroic one—alike from life and from death.

She gazed, therefore, not at the appearance itself but at its image in the mirror, seeing the room on either side the faint and misty blur of it with all the finical neatness and precision a mirror gives. . . . An effect artificial, even quaintly deceitful, like the sly smile of one who knows more than he, or she, intends to tell.

This effect of smiling reticence, of knowing more, of knowing best, affected Frances, bringing the thought of Mrs. Cressidy to her mind. As once before, she had the impression that lovely and treacherous woman—Alexis, Lord Oxley's ex-mistress—watched her in mingled challenge and amusement. And this stung her to decision. Still playing, making muted wistful music, Frances Copley turned her head and braced herself to speak.

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"When you first came," she said, her voice veiled, husky, even a little broken—"I was afraid. I thought only of myself. I was terrified both at you and at what you might demand from me. I hastened to leave this house, to go away and try to forget. But I wasn't permitted to forget. While I was away much concerning you was told me, which changed my feeling towards you and showed me my duty. I have come back of my own free will. I am still afraid; but I no longer mind being afraid. My desire now is, not to avoid, but rather to meet you. For, as I have learned, we are kinsfolk, you and I; and, since this house is mine, you are in a sense my guest. Of that I have come to be glad. I claim you as part of my inheritance—the most valued, the most welcome portion, if you so will it. If I can help, serve, comfort you, I am ready to do so to the utmost of my poor capacity. What conditions, what laws rule your present state of existence I don't, of course, know—nor whether what I say is intelligible to you. But even though my speech may not be so, I can't but hope my intention and my sympathy are."

A pure and sweet radiance, an effulgence

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of appeal and reverent pity showed itself in Frances' expression and intonation.

"I shall live in that hope," she told him, with gently engaging fervour. "Every day I will come to this room at the same hour. I will wait for you here, so that if you wish to reveal yourself further to me, you may have opportunity and leisure to do so. There's no hurry, no compulsion. Only, as I say, I am ready."

She got thus far and stopped, the audacity and conceivable impiety of these promises and proposals borne in upon her.

For might not she, only too probably, be inviting forces outside the legitimate human sphere, forces altogether beyond her power to deal with or control? Might she not sully and debauch her conscience by this rather prodigious compact, as by participation in unholy practices, assistance at some Black Mass? Imagination rioted. She felt to skirt the lip of an abyss, deeper than time, peopled by nameless and forbidden shapes of hideous import and incalculable potency. Stumbling, losing her foothold by ever so little, she might fall into that seething pit of horror, fall past all help, all recovery.

Then, on a sudden, she understood what

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was happening to her. The moment so lately previsedhad, in fact, arrived—the inevitable moment of mortal terror. The pangs of it were upon her, great as those of birth or the agony of dissolution—both of which they in some sort, repeated and prefigured. For wasn't she, in truth, both giving birth and suffering death in most marvellous fashion, awe-inspiring rites of initiation operating upon her? She had offered herself, was accepted. Mysteries were in process of being revealed to her. She also, though in an inverse position, was "breaking through." As the dead man forced his way so wonderfully back into the earthly environment, by presenting himself visibly to her, so she now forced her way onward, out of that same earthly environment. In both cases nature was defied, in a sense outraged, and of necessity took her just revenge by the infliction of suffering.

Yet, even when the trial was at its height, Frances had faith, the pangs would pass could she but endure; and that with their passing victory be achieved of the highest illumination and advantage.

Meanwhile, in good truth, they were merciless. They tore her, so that she bowed her deli-

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cate body together, leaning her head down and down until her forehead rested upon the backs of her hands, still extended over the keyboard of the piano.

"I dare it all," she sobbed, in her anguish of flesh and spirit. "I give myself willingly —give myself as ransom for the well-being and happiness of both. . . . Yes, both, both. . . . For Morris's freedom to live largely, fruitfully, by me unclaimed and unhampered; and for this wandering soul to gain redemption, no longer sense bound and passion-haunted to rest in peace."

With which supreme act of will and of devotion the climax was presently reached. Frances came out of the other side—only so can I phrase it, existing terminology being as yet inexact and misleading in respect of such rare psychic and psychological experiences. This much it is possible, however, to record—namely, that her state was radically yet very subtly changed. Through those amazing self-invoked rites of initiation she acquired the sixth sense and penetrated, in a degree, the fourth dimension, so that henceforth the supernormal was to her normal. She was delivered from the delusion of finality, the earthly life of the individual soul falling into

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its true and reasoned relation to the sum of things—as but a single lap in the eternal race, a single stage of the eternal journey; as but one dwelling, and that how small a one, in a city of measureless dimensions. . . . This not to the derogation of her present mortal and mundane condition; for she saw it no less precious, no less momentous or actual than any condition preceding or following it. Saw it as an essential link in the mighty chain of personal being, since without it the chain would be faulty, broken and incomplete. To acclaim only the whole is, as she perceived, an error, since a whole, without each and all of its parts is unthinkable, monstrous. But to limit thought and vision to one part alone is equally erroneous; and hence fraught with much practical distress and danger to both soul and spirit.

The immediate and direct effect of all which upon Frances Copley made for liberty from many conventions and superstitions; her feet, like those of the Psalmist, being thereby "set in a large room." She awoke to a wondering thankfulness, a happy spaciousness of moral and mental outlook; along with a sense of physical relief, of tension relaxed and pain obliterated. She breathed evenly and freely

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once more, felt her nerves steady, her body at ease, her confidence restored.

Sitting upright, she raised her hands, passing them over her eyes, as though wafting away some last remnant of unrestful sleep and ugly dreaming.

So doing, she became aware that her ghostly companion not only had moved, but had suffered some change also. He now stood close beside and leaned over her. The outlines of his handsome person had gained in distinctness, his whole figure in substance and opacity. She could distinguish the colour of his clothing, of his black satin stock, short-waisted blue coat and buff cord breeches, his high riding boots creased and wrinkled to the fineness of the ankle. His hands she could not see, they being apparently clasped behind him.

Lifting her graceful head, the dawn of a smile in her eyes and upon her lips, Frances looked up into his face, now so near to her own, and that without shrinking or repulsion although it still showed vague, a dull reddish-grey blotch through the encompassing twilight. But this, beyond begetting in her a wistful yearning and compassion, affected her but little. It in fact, as she joyfully regis-

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tered, quite curiously didn't matter. It offered no impediment to sympathy, nor to intercourse of the kind she now understood to be possible. For, thanks to those cruel rites of initiation, invited, performed and successfully endured, some new faculty of apprehension, new mode of approach and interchange of consciousness had come into play.

As yet she felt to grope after it, as a baby child learning to speak, gropes after the accredited sounds and associations of syllables by which to convey its needs and express its emotions. She was at the alphabet only of this new, this sublimated language. But she would master it. Oh, yes, she exultantly told herself, given practice and application she would master it effectually enough. Already didn't it begin to work—this strange new faculty of approach, of interpretation? She felt convinced it did. Felt convinced, moreover, that her ghostly visitant in some sort responded, being aware of her altered and enlightened state.

Persuaded thus, that at last she did veritably hold him to touch, that intelligent communication was established between herself and him, Frances' smile brightened to a delightful gladness, which set forth the value of

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her fragile moonlight beauty to the full. She looked, indeed, exceedingly lovely just then, in the repose of her proven courage, her wonder of discovery and achievement.

"As I have said, you and I are kinsfolk; but in the last few minutes haven't we improved on that, converting the hereditary connection into something of a personal one?" she asked him, with sweetly tempered gaiety. "Mayn't we go so far as to declare ourselves friends, who, through much tribulation—for I also have suffered, though in a humbler, less conspicuous manner than you—have been drawn to one another, very wonderfully made known to one another to our mutual advantage and content?"

And here, though by instinct and habit the least erotic or flirtatious of women, Frances intentionally put forth all her power to captivate and to engage. For she, on her part, became alive to the increasing attraction exercised over her by this amazing companion. Fear ceased, giving place to quite opposite sensations, to enjoyment, indeed, of his presence. Not alone a philanthropic duty-call to aid the enlargement of some unhappy earth-bound spirit now animated her, but feelings decidedly less abstract and more genial. For

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while the minutes passed, the man himself—if as man she could in reason regard him—his character and qualities as revealed to her through the medium of that much enlightening sixth sense, claimed Frances Copley's approval and satisfied her rather exacting taste. Granted, poor dear, he had run after strange flesh, loved not wisely but far too well, and in the despairing sequel taken means reprehensibly crude—as, in the event, shoutingly unsuccessful—to obtain release from sorrow; yet, as she now read him, he remained throughout a finely tempered, finely sensitive creature. She warmed to his reckless devotion, though bestowed on so thankless a feminine object. Oh! without doubt little Lady Lucia was right, on that perfect summer evening strolling up over the great lawns from the lake at beautiful Napworth, when she declared suicide, in his peculiar case, a *beau geste* rather than an act of cowardice!

And here, as with the lessening daylight, the lofty drawing-room of the tall villa became a place of brooding obscurity, uncertain forms and shadows, Frances grew sensible that the human aspects of her strange companion gained very strangely in actuality and in appeal. What he had formerly been, all the

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notable promise of his nature and circumstances—before that same ill-judged, though engaging *beau geste* set him miserably wandering, outlawed by his own deed alike from both worlds—became arrestingly and very wonderfully clear to her.

"Let us trust one another," she therefore presently prayed him, her soft, husky voice taking an endearing accent and cadence. "I earnestly beg you to have confidence in me, as I most truly have confidence in you. Let us agree to put all desperation away from us—for you, in your time, if what I hear of you is true, have been somewhat over-desperate. . . . You see, I make bold to claim the privileges of friendship and speak to you without subterfuge or circumlocution. . . . If, as they tell me, by a woman you were broken, by a woman shall you be healed—even by me. While, if by a man I have been wounded, by a man will I be healed—even by you. Each shall act as physician to the other, thus curing sickness and adjusting past trials and wrongs. Ah! believe me," she very charmingly admonished him, "it will all work out to an excellently comfortable conclusion, if we keep faith with one another, you, Alexis, Lord Oxley, my kinsman, and I. For it can't

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be for nothing we are permitted this extraordinary intercourse, so contrary to the conduct and probabilities of ordinary experience. In justice to our own intelligence we must make a success of it. For wouldn't it amount to a quite scandalous admission of ineptitude to let the whole business end here and thus, sinking out of sight into nothingness, like so much water spilled on sand?"

Carried out of herself, transported by her own words and emotions, Frances rose to her feet as she concluded her speech. Down the side street, meanwhile, and along the road in front of the house a lamp-lighter made his evening round. Following immediately upon his progress, yellow-gleaming brightness flashed up and inward through the high, narrow windows, stamping the pattern of the lace curtains in fine filigree upon wall and ceiling, transforming the room from an abode of brooding obscurity into one of delicately fantastic light.

In this sudden illumination, far from fading out with the vanishing shadows, the visitor's person appeared to Frances to cast off its last semblance of the spectral and unreal. Definite in colour and in contour—always excepting the face—positive and substantial as

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that of any gentleman her contemporary and acquaintance who, for reasons best known to himself, should elect to masquerade, at six o'clock of an autumn evening in his great-grandfather's clothes, it was there opposite to her, head and shoulders slightly inclined as though courteously observant of herself and attentive to her address.

In all which hadn't she cause enough, in good truth, for glorying of the liveliest? For didn't this courteous and, indeed, almost affectionate attitude very handsomely justify her belief that her meaning and purpose penetrated his understanding, not only finding intelligent lodgment there, but ready acceptance and entertainment? She had been very frank, very outspoken concerning his past action and present parlous state. But this he evidently didn't resent. He in no wise repulsed her advances. On the contrary, she divined a deepening appreciation, deepening sympathy. To Frances this spelled victory —triumph, and that of the rarest sort. The promise of that enchanted time, spent under the roof of wonderful old Mrs. Allenby-Knox, at Stourmouth—when this, her crusade of rescue, was just conceived—was in act of being quite royally fulfilled. From out the long

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record of failure, with which she sadly credited herself, leaped a success little short of miraculous. She had staked so much—so immensely, incalculably much—and won! . . . So at least she delightedly assured herself.

Still the whole affair being of so extravagant a nature, she craved further outside testimony to that delightful assurance. The reality of her success meant so very, very much to her. She hugged her belief in it and cried for greater certitude on account of its very delightfulness. Her excitement just now was intense; but thanks to the innate sweetness and refinement of her nature, excitement in no respect demoralised her, robbing her of charm or outward restraint.

"Lord Oxley," she began, "I beg you tell me, do you agree? Will you enter into the compact and help me to continue this mysterious adventure, this joining of hands across the river of death! For, as I see it, it is nothing less than that. Will you come to me here, visibly, as this evening, again? That you should do so would give me the highest pleasure—would indeed make me singularly happy. I speak in all sincerity. Will you not speak to me in return? I conjure you give me some sign, answer me."

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And, in her fervour, forgetful of his discarnate predicament, she suited her action to the image of hand-clasping across the waters of death, and in fact held out her hand to him. But when, after hesitation, as of one bewildered coming to himself, he moved a step nearer bringing both hands from behind his back, she recoiled in something approaching disgust. Violence in any and every form was loathsome to her; and here Frances set eyes on the symbol, at least, of violence of the coarsest sort. This swung her back out of cherished triumph into sentiment of quite other and earlier character. For in his right hand her visitor clasped a heavy pistol; seeing which she also saw, with rather terrible distinctness of detail, this very same visitor lying dead in the little square garden outside—where the fitful south-easterly breeze just now shivered the sooty shrubs and withered roses—the grey flags on which he lay, the steps and foolishly prancing stone lions, horribly bespattered with his brains and blood.

"Oh! no—no"—she cried in agonised protest, "not that, Lord Oxley. In mercy spare both yourself and me any fresh rehearsal of that hideous catastrophe. It is over—for ever done with. Never let us recall it. That you

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should obliterate all thought of it, gain final relief from the consequences of it, has been my fondest hope, my dearest object. Surely you understand it's the very core and heart of this whole amazing business? Surely you're not going so bitterly to disappoint me? Tell me, assure me you do know this, that you do intend to work with me, you do understand?"

A space of—to Frances Copley—cruel suspense followed; while she strained every sense, every faculty to the detection and reception of some answering message. And at last, faintly, dimly, one began to reach her—though whether audibly, through the medium of ordinary speech, or through the new and sublimated channel of communion lately disclosed to her where mind reveals itself directly to mind, she couldn't for certain say. She listened intently, intensely, to an utterance at first incoherent, as that of a person awakening from grievous sickness to consciousness and sanity. The struggle after expression struck her as infinitely pathetic.

. . . He understood. He was grateful. Her compassion, her heroic effort claimed and compelled him. But long silence, long disuse made him inept, tongue-tied. . . . Yes, he

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would return, since she desired it—he himself also desiring it. It could be done. It could be done, his dawning recovery of will, stimulated by her active will.

This, or something to this effect, she gathered, to her great contentment though also to her no small agitation. For this parley with a ghost, while setting a convincing seal of actuality upon the whole transaction, was on that very account, not a little portentous.

"It's a bargain, then," she gently told him, exercising rigid self-control though she shivered even as the withered roses in the breath of the east wind there outside. "I am more than pleased. I shall not be unpunctual either to-morrow or after to-morrow, I give you my word. Now—for to-night, farewell —I—I am a little tired," she said.

Going downstairs Frances clung to the hand-rail of the slender twisted balusters. Victory exacted its price. The tax on nerves and on imagination had been enormous. Reaching the hall, faintness overcame her. . . . She sank a piteous, crumpled heap upon the floor.

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CHAPTER VII

ELIZABETH, the housemaid, drew back the daffodil yellow and white-striped curtains. Raised the blinds, flooding the room with the misty sunshine of a London autumn morning. She brought the nicely appointed breakfast tray across to the bedside, and waited, her forehead worried, her pretty hazel eyes at once timid and perplexed.

Obedient to the call of light and movement, to this opening of the ordinary diurnal domestic ritual, Frances Copley put up her hands, lifting the soft weight of her hair from off her temples, sighed, and then—in spotless raiment of lawn, lace and ribbons of pearl-grey and pearl-pink—drew herself up into a sitting position against the pillows. Vast tracts of dreamless, yet somewhat dolorous, sleep stretched away behind her—the sleep of nervous exhaustion—from the depressing influences of which consciousness disengaged itself but slowly and not without a measure of mental and physical distress. She mistook her

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bearings, hardly recognising where, or indeed who, she was. The edges of her personality were curiously frayed and ravelled. All objects which met her gaze—the neat blue and white-clad maid, the breakfast tray, the daffodil and white-hung bed-chamber—were curiously unmeaning, unrelated and remote in this bewildering emergence from those vast and doleful tracts of sleep.

But shortly her natural graciousness, and quick consideration for the comfort of others, asserted itself in face of the young housemaid's evidently troubled state.

"Have I overslept myself? Is it very late, Elizabeth?" she asked.

"After half-past ten, ma'am—and I have been in three times already, but didn't like to disturb you, you seemed so quiet. Only me and Mrs. Cheape"—inappropriate name of the formidably respectable wife of the police constable—"were frightened to let you go on any longer without nourishmnet. You see, ma'am, you never had any proper dinner last night."

Hearing which admonitory and somewhat reproachful statement Frances Copley's consciousness further disengaged itself. Remembrance fled rather breathlessly backward

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across the intervening tracts of sleep to events and experiences immediately preceding them —from which they might indeed be judged to derive. Under the pressure of the diurnal domestic ritual, as represented by her breakfast tray, under the pressure, too, of the hoarse continuous murmur of London and its myriad activities—ranging away for miles on every hand in the misty autumnal sunshine—those events and experiences assumed a high improbability. Reason faltered, denying credence to the offers made, promises given, to that compact respecting further intercourse, to the whole prodigious affair in short of commerce with the dead. Her triumph of last night, this morning took on vulgar pathological suggestions. Had not she been overwrought, hysterical, a prey to morbid hallucinations?

She glanced at the little black-hooded telephone upon the table by her bed—that ugly mechanical canceller of time and space. Should she ring up Dr. Plowden or his understudy? . . . The great man himself was still probably on holiday. . . . Request attendance, report her collapse? . . . Disclosure need go no further than that at present. . . .

Suddenly she discovered herself to be al-

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most sickeningly in want of food. The telephone could wait. She would breakfast before deciding to commit herself to the ministrations of the faculty. Not only did she breakfast, but bathed and leisurely dressed. She felt languid and listless, above all indescribably lonely. The sunshine mocked; so that she was glad when about mid-day the wind, shifting, began to draw up clouds in the west. The hours went leaden-footed. Scepticism oppressed her. She suffered a coldness, a blank indifference towards her own, real or supposed, mission. Yet she, in fact, neither telephoned for Dr. Plowden, nor did she fail, at the appointed time, to keep her tryst.

Rain, by now, fell steadily but softly, in a quiet penetrating soak. Pavements and roadway took on a darker hue. Air and earth were alike released from the all-pervading curse of dust. A freshness filled the drawing-room, distilled by the silent grateful wet. And Frances Copley, drawing the gilt, cane-seated arm-chair, of fateful memory, into the shallow embrasure of the second window, sat down there within the shelter of the lace curtains, and looked out over the trees on the canal bank into the grey rain-blotted vistas of the Park.

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Thus the skies wept to the refreshing of parched and arid London. And presently, almost unawares, Frances wept with them, tears stealing quietly down her cheeks unchecked.

She bent her head, and setting her elbow on the gilded chair-arm, rested her chin in the palm of her hand. Eventually refreshment came to her, also through the breaking of the drought; for although she was immersed in sadness, that sadness was of gentle quality, unsullied by anger or revolt. Her sympathy went out to all creatures who suffer in mind, body, or estate. Among them, it went out to herself in a strangely impersonal manner, she withdrawn, contemplating as from a distance, her own high hopes, her ecstasies, yesterday's claim to achievement, to-day's revulsion, apathy and weariful distrust.

"Oh! to be stable," she told herself. "To be fixed, with some sure foundation in oneself or in another on which to build. My heart is hungry. . . . This chill indifference grows from that hunger. . . . Yet—yet, at least in act I have kept faith. I am here ready to fulfil my share of the—perhaps only imagined—bargain. If I've deceived myself, or have been deceived by an unhealthy

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condition of nerves and brain, I will yet remain true to my delusion. Neither the good Plowden, nor his understudy, shall interfere to cure me of it against my will."

Frances raised her head, looked round, her attention claimed by a just perceptible whisper of footsteps crossing the carpet, and saw, through the blur of her tears, the form of a young man approach her, both his hands extended and both hands empty. . . .

"Ah! you too keep faith," she rather brokenly exclaimed. "And you give me the sign! You come unarmed—at peace with yourself as I joyfully dare believe; and therefore bringing peace to me."

This marked the last of Frances Copley's divagations. From now onward she possessed the stability for which she had prayed. If life narrowed for her, it also deepened, as is the way of life when lived under the dominance of a single idea and according to rule. Each day conformed to an inflexible pattern, her course rendered the easier because representatives of the world to which she belonged rarely honoured London, at that pre-war period, save as birds of passage during the autumnal season of the year. Frances' exile to the confines of Primrose Hill helped fur-

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ther to secure her against intrusion; for what distinguished bird of passage would willingly wing its flight so far astray from routes approved by fashion?

She spent the mornings in her room, reading, attending to her correspondence and such small amount of business, domestic or other, as might demand her care. . . . The guiltless police constable and Mrs. Cheape had departed, and her two other maids were duly restored to her, thus making her modest establishment complete. . . . Keeping continental hours, she came down to luncheon at noons, and, after that meal, walked in the park along the road bordering the canal; or —taking train or taxi-cab—went socially west, though actually and geographically southward upon errands of shopping, picture seeing and the like. On her return she had tea in Morris's library, only subsequent to which did the serious work of each twenty-four hours actually commence. The rest was automatic, a matter of sleep-walking almost, so little did it touch the finer issues and interests of her mind and heart.

She changed her dress, making herself delicately resplendent in soft-hued silks and velvets, jewels, filmy tissues, costly embroideries

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and lace. Thus arrayed, as for an assembly, she entered the drawing-room, there to sit at first in dusk and firelight, later on, as the days shortened and nights lengthened, in firelight and that of cleverly-shaded lamps, sometimes solitary but more often in converse with Alexis, Lord Oxley's unlaid ghost.

The nature and method of the said converse is far from easy to describe. Notwithstanding her acquisition of the—so to call it—sixth sense, to sustain and develop that converse kept Frances Copley's wits, kept her so happily enlarged power of receptivity and divination, very much at the salute. . . . All the time she must be on the spot, her whole attention, her whole emotion focussed upon her companion; or mental contact weakened, she ceased entirely to hold his mind and to interpret his needs and thought. He began to slip away from her apprehension, to flicker out. Never, truly, had mother stranger child to humour and tenderly to school! Never had nurse more elusive patient to win back to sanity and health! Not that for one instant he was other than gentle and docile with her; anxious, so she surely read him, to meet, even to forestall, her every request, her every wish. For each scrap of her giving, he'd have given

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double, treble in return—if he could. But he couldn't—and in just exactly that lay the extreme pathos, the almost agonising attraction of him and his situation, the quite heart-breaking charm which, to Frances, never lessened or grew stale.

Presently, striving for a definition, that common phrase "a lost soul" began to take on a new and curiously actual meaning for her. It wasn't a figure of speech, but a scientific reality and fact, and this in its simplest and most obvious application. For as time passed, she grew to understand that she dealt not with one sick, still less with one mad, or even with a person of a different nationality, language and traditions, but with one lost. Just precisely that. A creature lost, condemned to wander without direction and without hope. One for whom neither sun or moon rose or set, for whom no stars shone to steer by through blank confusion of the endless, featureless waste. For wasn't he every bit as much lost as any solitary castaway at sea, any strayed traveller in trackless desert or trackless forest? He couldn't find the way. There wasn't indeed any way to find. He moved in a maze from which there was no exit, journeyed in a vicious circle, per-

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petually returning whence he started. With this added horror that his only link with things, either of spirit or of sense, was a recurrent draw to this house, the quaintly furtive tall villa, which had sheltered the passion and despair of his young manhood, a recurrent draw to rehearse the culminating act engendered by that despair in futile phantom loneliness.

To Frances Copley, as she increasingly appreciated and entered into it, his sentence appeared sad beyond any more active and direct form of imaginable punishment. For the curse of the forsaken and forgotten was upon it, the curse of being cut off, cast out—lost. Yes, that one utterly woeful word summed it up, covered it. . . . And it lay with her to teach him he wasn't last, to guide him out of the maze, to break up the vicious circle—to pray him out of purgatory, in short, not with phrases but with an illimitable patience, application and provenant tenderness.

Along these lines she not unsuccessfully worked; but the process was slow, and, to her, arduous. For the ground of their intercourse was of necessity extraordinarily restricted. He lived in memory only, his relation to the modern world limited to his relations to her.

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Yet notwithstanding manifold limitations and obstructions, intimacy grew and ripened, becoming close and, to Frances, very precious. For she loved, and that with an absorbed and hidden wistfulness. She wooed Lord Oxley with music, with sweet words, implied rather than positively said, with long waiting silences, with a fine reticence of comment when —in moments of self-revelation—he held up the mirror to former ambitions, sorrows and that infatuation which had so lamentably proved his undoing and his curse. Frances picked her way among cherished, half-fearful mysteries, a strange light in her moth-like eyes and smile upon her lips. She grew thin, however. Sleep and appetite alike became capricious. She was troubled by palpitations and a quick little cough.

That she should follow so definite and so peculiar a programme week in and week out and not provoke domestic speculation and comment, would be asking too much. The servants wondered both in silence and in speech; but strictly amongst themselves. Since food, wages, "outings" were generous, work light, and Mrs. Copley a "real lady as anybody could wish to serve, ever so kind and nice," discipline and loyalty prevailed.

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"Considering what things were done in *some* houses they could name"—with emphasis, and a pursing of the lips—"if she chose to put on 'eavenly dresses to play the piano, in the drawing-room, by herself, from after tea till the dinner-bell rung, for certain she'd the right." And at that they left matters.

To Frances, meanwhile, her course appeared increasingly clear. For Flora Cressidy, of evil and voluptuous memory, must be met with her own weapons, beaten on her own terrain, in respect of loveliness at least. Hence she, Frances, must strive to look her fairest, not despising those aids to and enhancements of beauty which rich and tasteful clothing unquestionably supply. This decking forth of herself was at moments a weariness; yet she persisted, spending time, strength, imagination upon it with a fervour almost religious in its exaltation. The position was rendered easier for her through unlooked-for bounty on the part of her uncle, Lord Bulparc.

For that so-large-hearted nobleman, where a pretty woman was concerned—at the tail end of a genial discursive letter announcing the birth, to Lady Lucia and Mr. Ulick FitzGibbon, of a son and heir—informed his niece that he had to-day given himself the pleasure of

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placing five hundred pounds to the credit of her banking account. He made light of the transaction, excusing himself indeed for a certain temerity in venturing to offer any such gift.

"But," so he wrote, "hearing that gad-about husband of yours (who, in my opinion, you would be well rid of altogether did providence happen to see things that way) may not be back in England for another six months or more, as Lucia tells me, I cannot help feeling you may find yourself straightened for ready money. If you raise any objection to accepting this trumpery sum from me, I warn you, I shall be both hurt and offended. I shall mention it to no one—least of all to her ladyship. Nor I trust will you. Just let it be between you and me, my dear child, and the bed-post, if you please."

Frances, touched and grateful, raised no objection.—Thus, by a curious inversion of all ordinary procedure, did Bulparc cash of the twentieth century, indirectly minister to the solace of a member of Bulparc family getting on for a century dead and buried!

Her treasure chest thus conveniently replenished—and truth to tell the contents of it had fallen pretty low—Frances permitted herself to buy some new and more than ever

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delicious confections, wherewith to further the extinction of any memories of Flora Cressidy's pernicious beauty which might still survive. But, even while so doing, she could not but ask herself, what would happen when the said extinction was an accomplished fact. And here—since it must be admitted her mental—or wasn't it rather?—her emotional attitude had changed somewhat, not in intensity but in direction, she found herself on the horns of a really woeful dilemma.

For did not precisely the unholy influence, exercised by those same memories, hold the spirit of Flora Cressidy's all-too-faithful ex-lover captive to earth, captive above all to the tall villa, her former dwelling-place? Those monstrous bonds once broken, logic compelled Frances' recognition of what must inevitably follow; and against the inevitable event her poor heart increasingly rebelled. So that during the long, too often wakeful nights of late autumn and early winter, she would turn restlessly in her bed, her eyes wide open in the close clinging darkness, while she made her moan—

"To save him, to set him free, is also to lose him—unless, oh! unless it is granted me, and that sinlessly, without violence or law-

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breaking, to carry out to the full my design."

And she would pause, silent, even in thought, before the consummation she had so daringly conceived on the evening of her return from her godmother's house at Stourmouth.

Her situation had already reached this pass by the first week in November. Coming back one afternoon after an excursion to the shop of a certain famous modiste in Dover Street, she paid off her taxi in Regent's Park about half a mile from home. The rest of the way she would walk, since it was still early and the weather unusually bright and mild. The bare black trees spread beneath a sky dimly blue above and, in the west, flushed with faint smoky rose. Looking between the trunks of them lavender mist closed each avenue. Below them, revived by October rains, the grass, though tarnished and sere in the open, had regained much of its vivid green.

The colours pleased Frances, especially that blotting of lavender mist—ethereal in quality, a veil let down over the harsh actualities of London. For she still loved veils, loved things indeterminate, and vague, loved them, perhaps, more deeply than ever before. The weather she loved too. This pause on the

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verge of winter, windless, reflective, seemed an intermediate state—but not purgatorial, merely of suspended desire, of suspended animation and energy, a peaceful folding of busy hands and sitting still on the part of Nature.

Turning along the road to the left, Frances Copley went half way across the bridge, which here spans the canal, and stood there for a minute or so. Immediately beneath, in the shadow of the broad low arch the water showed a thick greenish black, fouled by floating scum; but, further away, the unbroken surface of it gleamed and glistened repeating the dim brightness of the tinted sky. Within the park railings on the right, a mountainous heap of fallen leaves burned. Not with outbreak of flame, being damp, but with innumerable whorls and jets of keenly blue smoke which, gathering in volume and uniting as they cleared the top of the umber and russet mound, drifted across the canal horizontally from bank to bank in a weaving and billowing cloud, the pungent, slightly acrid scent of it hanging in the quiet air. And that scent begot in Frances visions of Napworth on November afternoons such as this, the smoke of burning leaves impregnating the atmosphere, when she, short-skirted, with

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streaming hair and shoutings flew, swift as nimble feet would carry her, down over the sloping lawns to the tranquil lakeside, little Lady Lucia and protesting French nursery-maids breathlessly bringing up the rear.

Then the super-abundant vitality of childhood had risen defiant, instinctively asserting itself against Nature's reflective mood, against this pause in the creative energy which to-day she found so soothing and so sympathetic.—Ah! yes, she'd journeyed far since those days of irresponsible and heady gladness!—So, for that matter, had Lucia also; though by an easier course and to a decidedly less eccentric landing-place! Only this morning a positive Te Deum, hymning the wonders of the son and heir, reached her from her cousin.

"It was very red to begin with," Lady Lucia wrote, "and oh, my dearest, so dreadfully *creased*. Considering that both Ulick and I are passably good looking I can't say it was flattering our united effort should produce so *very* quaint a result. But it is quite the right colour now, with a really *divine* skin, and not a single crease left. They have *all* come out, except the cunningest little folds, like bracelets, round its weeny wrists. It really is too darling for words *all over*. You

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must see it before it gets more common-place and big.—Ulick talks as though it would be fit to ride to hounds to-morrow. I hardly think that. Still could not you come just for a week-end to make *sure* of seeing it in this *fascinating* stage? We're both booked to go over to Ireland some time before Christmas to exhibit our blessed babe to a devoted(?) tenantry. I rather dread the idea of the journey and change of climate for the poor innocent; but Ulick has been so *perfectly* angelic to me about everything lately and so touchingly adores his son—as of course he *ought*—only one's men don't—do they?—*always* do just what they ought—that I feel in this I must 'oblige', as the trades people say."

And so forth and so on, through three closely written sheets.

These over-flowings of rapturous young motherhood, which even a few weeks earlier would have caused Frances Copley much wistful envy, now affected her, to her own surprise, hardly at all. She had, indeed, studied them that morning—her letters being brought with her breakfast to her bed-chamber, where she lay resting after an all too wakeful night—in indulgent wonder. She rejoiced in dar-

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ling Lucia's happiness of course; but wasn't jealous of it. Why should she be so? For hadn't she touched deeper mysteries of late, tasted higher, because more spiritual, delights than any which centre round a basinette? She believed so; and so believing flushed, for an instant, with tender, if slightly fanatical, pride.

Reminded of these rapturous over-flowings, this afternoon, by visions of the Napworth of her childhood in which Lady Lucia bore so constant a part, she was again aware how little they moved her. Decidedly they left her cold, in their inferiority of cause and of object, as compared with her own most marvellous possession.—And thereupon—drawn by a sudden craving to be back, to obtain sight and knowledge of that same marvellous possession once more—she turned from peaceful contemplation of the gleaming water, the burning leaves and drifting billowing smoke. For the time might be short—she almost bitterly told herself—short just in proportion to the success of her endeavours.

Crossing the bridge, hurrying just a little, she gained the road—here over-looked by blocks of red-brick and free-stone flats piled up rather monstrously to heaven—running

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parallel with the canal bank and leading, eastward, to the tall villa. As she did so a large khaki-coloured touring car shot past; and, in obedience to orders hulloed by its occupant to the chauffeur, drew up, with a snarl of powerful engines and grind of sharply applied brakes, by the kerb about twenty yards ahead. Charlie Montagu scuffled open the door, bounced out onto the pavement and—the fronts of his fur-lined overcoat flapping open and revealing light yellowish green tweeds beneath—advanced towards her, pulling off his right glove.

"Great, my dear lady," he cried, "simply great, running across you like this in the open—the just reward of perseverance, after the number of times I've rung your front door bell this autumn without success!—Earlier, I mean, when you first came back."

He blew out his chest, swaggering in front of her, soft high-crowned brown felt hat in hand.

"Been away for the last three weeks myself. Nipped off to Monte Carlo in that good old car of mine with a friend or two. Cheery little quartette in fact—no growsing and some sport. Out of the season, rather, I al-

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low; still, in season and out, Monte's a peach, no mistake about that."

Mrs. Copley walked forward in the direction of the tall villa. He kept beside her. Effusive cordiality, born, in part at least—like his slightly fixed gaze and ripe complexion—of a late and generous luncheon washed down with copious draughts of champagne, exhaled from his large and florid person as from his rapid speech.

"And I needed to ease off a bit," he went on, dropping his voice to a more confidential note. "Give you my word, I did. With Copley the other side of the globe and his affairs as well as my own to manipulate, I've been glued to the end of the phone and the wire all the summer, even when rusticating at my little place down at Marlow. Not that I grumble, mind you, at Copley's leaving his business on my hands. Very far from that, my dear Mrs. Copley, since anything I do for him I flatter myself I do for you also, don't you see?"

"You are very kind," Frances said.

—She could no less; though, bursting thus headlong in on her after protracted relief from his society, the man's appearance and manner struck her as almost flagrantly offen-

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sive. To be in any degree his debtor, and that through fear of what was now so wholly precious to her, seemed a very crown and climax of ignominy. Tears of humiliation rose in Frances' eyes as she paced the grey, softly sunlit pavement beside him.

Of all this Montagu remained fatuously ignorant. He swelled with satisfaction.

"Don't talk of kindness as between you and me," he answered largely—"or you'll put me out. Upon my word you will. To do anything for you is the greatest pleasure I have in life. And you must be well enough aware of that—unless I'm a much more reticent fellow then I take myself to be——"

And he laughed, covering her with a bold appraising glance.—Extraordinary how effective she looked in that plain dark blue coat and skirt—and the sables. Thundering good sables though when you came to remark them. They must have cost a small fortune. Dated prior to old Morry's smash, no doubt. —Just a matter of cut, style and cut, you know, those clothes of hers—and the deuced tip top smart little woman inside them. Not that she really belonged to the little ones—willowy, if you like, but not little. Over the average in height, for a fact. That helped to

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give her the A.1. sort of air she had with her —that and blood; for say what you like, when all comes to all, there's a devilish lot in blood.—

He audibly sighed.

—Pity they weren't walking down Bond Street now, at mid-day together, he and she; or at Church Parade on a fine Sunday morning in the Park! Those were the places to show yourself so as just to let people know. A good many of your aristocratic first-flighters, who were so beastly handy at giving him —Montagu—the go-by, would be nicely knocked if they saw him and Mrs. Copley strolling together—she under his protection.—

He rolled the phrase round his tongue, though unspoken, with remarkable relish.

—Protection—yes—But that nobby little object lesson sadly missed fire in this god-forsaken surburban road, was wasted, quite damnably wasted as eye-opening advertisement.

Nevertheless, crossing the said road opposite the tall villa, Montagu made it an opportunity for tucking his hand under Mrs. Copley's elbow as if her safety were menaced by a stream of traffic.—Supporting, shielding, propelling her affectionately forward al-

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though nothing more actively dangerous or impressible was in sight than his own chauffeur, a solitary nursery-maid wheeling a perambulator, and a couple of scavengers with their flap-lidded, pink-painted cart, drawn by a glossy bay horse whose massive proportions suggested those of a half-grown and healthy young elephant.

In the library at tea—to partake of which common courtesy compelled Frances to invite him—Montagu kept up what he would have described as the same "dear old game." Not that he was otherwise than sober, technically speaking: but that the extensive luncheon aforesaid induced in him an enterprising and expansive frame of mind. The company sharing his recent trip to Monte Carlo—Miss Myrtle Vane figured in that gay quartette—was hardly of the kind which stickles for refinement or extra fastidious standards of taste. Owing to its habitual freedom of speech and manners, Montagu had a little forgotten, perhaps, that although the ultimate object of your approach to all pretty women may be the same—a very simple one—it is wise to grade your pace, not to unmask your batteries too soon, or omit to fling some slight disguise over the frankness of your assault.

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To disregard such precautions, incredible though it may appear, is, in some cases, actually to court a disconcerting repulse.

"This is a new move, giving up your drawing-room, and camping here in Morris's snuggery, isn't it, Mrs. Copley?" he presently enquired spreading himself in his chair, throwing one leg jauntily across the other. "And, upon my word, a right one in my humble opinion. Charmingly arranged though it is, I confess it seemed to me there was something funny about your room upstairs the last time I saw you, when you were good enough to let me prescribe for you after that little fainting turn you had. I'm the least superstitious of men, hard-headed, and hard-bitten too, I'm afraid"—and he laughed, as owning bravely to his self-impeachment—"but I give you my word I received the funniest impression. Couldn't account for it anyhow. Honestly I believe I should cry off sitting there alone in the dark. Now, as between friends, Mrs. Copley, have you ever noticed anything a bit jumpy about the place yourself?"

"I am particularly fond of that room," Frances said, with admirable and impressive composure, looking up at him from under the brim of her black hat.

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"Come, come, my dear lady, don't be harsh with me!" he heavily bantered her, somewhat taken aback. "You must make excuses for me.—Where one's interested one's bound to be sensitive and get anxious, you know. It's only human nature, eh?—For the life of me I couldn't help putting two and two together afterwards—my own unaccountable sensations, I mean, and your fainting attack. I assure you I worried a lot about that. Should have worried more if you hadn't been just off to Napworth Castle, where I could trust to your being properly appreciated and taken care of.—No, no"—as Frances, greatly incensed, made an effort to speak—"I know what you are bound to say, but don't protest. I take all this pretty seriously, Mrs. Copley. Copley left his affairs in my hands; and if I make free to enlarge the scope of the commission so as to include yourself, it isn't without reasonable cause——"

Montagu set down his cup, with ponderous deliberation. His manner had changed to the solemn and official. He leaned back his chair, planting his elbows on the arms of it, brought the tips of his fingers together, and stared at them, his low forehead wrinkled as an ape's.

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"Not without reasonable cause," he repeated. "And that brings me to a point which has bothered me most deucedly ever since the early days of my stop at Monte. Came on me as a bolt from the blue on my first evening there.—Met these people staying at the same hotel—South Americans, chummed up with them casually, as you do travelling, don't you know——"

—Frances Copley didn't know, this not being her manner of travelling; but let the statement pass.—

"Yes, a bolt from the blue," he repeated. "And I have been in two minds as to whether it is my duty to tell you about it or not ever since."

"Clearly it is impossible for me to advise you," Frances said.

Her eyes were on the clock. She was athirst for relief from her guest's most unwelcome conversation and presence, be free to prepare herself, with due ceremony, for the dear encounter of almost daily occurrence. Time drew on, and the thought of appearing unpunctual, still more of being cheated of some portion of her cherished converse, mightily distressed her. Under a calm and chilly grace she feverishly fretted, straining as a

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fine-limbed grey-hound at the leash. Yet how to excuse herself? How to terminate this wearisomely distasteful interview? For hadn't Montagu contrived to remind her, and that not uncleverly, she was in his debt? His penetration—in connecting her distracted state, on the occasion of his and her last meeting—with some mysterious influence resident, here, in the tall villa itself, startled and alarmed her. Aroused her indignation, further, as a laying of profane hands upon that which is holy—a defiling of the shrine whereat she so devoutly, so fervently worshipped.

Pushed hither and thither by which conflicting impulses and restraints, she paid but small attention to the opening phrases of his ensuing discourse; so that he was well away with his narrative before she realised the extremely personal and delicate trend of it.

"I'm too much a man of the world to be hard on my brother man," he was saying; with conciliatory emphasis. Ours is not a Puritanical generation—Accepted. I grant that. Still when a fellow has drawn first prize in the marriage lottery—good Lord, Mrs. Copley, it makes my blood boil to have him behave so rottenly. If some others of us had had his chance!"

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And the speaker looked upward to the ceiling as calling the heavenly host to witness.

"Of course one isn't going to let an old friend down," he nobly continued, "even when he does what one's gorge rises at. It isn't cricket. So I swore myself nearly black in the face to these good folks—Really tip top people, you know, Mrs. Copley, splendid manners, refined and all that—for colonials awfully smart. And rich. You may take it from me, confoundedly gilt-edged. I sounded them. Made me feel a downright pauper —my aunt!—that they did.—Swore they must be mistaken. Copley might be a bit of a dog but not that sort—giving himself out as a bachelor, and running after a flapper with her hair only just up. I told 'em frankly, at the risk of offending them, I didn't credit the story. It wasn't good enough. But they gave me chapter and verse. And they were straight from that part of Chile, you see, from San Diego itself—own a house in the town and big country estate in the neighbourhood. Copley's stopped with them there more than once. And they gave me to understand local society's simply off its head about him, ready to let him have his pick of the girls—in the

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most exclusive set too. She's a big heiress this Miss Maraquita del Paz and——"

"Thank you, Mr. Montagu." Frances raised her hand to enjoin silence—"Thanks, that is enough. I have no wish to know the young lady's name, whether she does or does not exist. I willingly share your belief that she does not——"

"Awfully sweet of you," he broke in. "I like to hear you speak like that. Exactly the tone I expected you to take, Mrs. Copley."

He drew his chair nearer hers.

'Only, in your high-mindedness—which I admire with my whole soul—you jump to conclusions too fast. For I had to back down. As a level-headed man I couldn't hold out against the evidence. It convinced me. If it hadn't done so do you suppose, my dear lady, I would ever have insulted you by reference to the subject? Good Lord, no, Mrs. Copley. I'd too thankfully have spared you, spared Morris—spared myself, for it's mighty unpleasant, I tell you, to act informer to your friend's wife. Unless—unless, I might have some cause to hope his—his—Copley's, I mean, turning out such an uncommon bad egg makes a difference as between you and me."—

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He drew his chair yet closer, his large high-coloured face advanced, his eyes lustful, his lips covetous and gross.

"You must have seen my admiration, Mrs. Copley. I've made no secret of it and it isn't a matter of yesterday," he said. "You haven't altogether discovered it, I think—went out with me that evening alone—let me dine with you and all that.—I've stood by Morris, seen him through, set him on his feet, all—you must be aware of that safe enough—all for your sweet sake. And he's played a low game on you—a blackguardly low game considering who you're related to and considering your personal attractions. Copley must be demented to give you, of all created women, the go-by. You can't let it pass. Damned if I can let it pass either. We must read him a lesson in very large print. That's what I'm getting at. Won't you—won't you let us take our revenge together?"

Montagu's voice grew rasping and hoarse. But before, paralysed by disgust and amazement, Frances had time to apprehend his meaning or combat his purpose, his coarse, paw-like—though much manicured—hand grasped her wrist.

"Take your revenge," he stammered ex-

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citedly, "and give me mine, by giving me bliss. Let him know two can play at that game, by Gad—Punish him and make me happy both—both at once."

And his hand travelled up her arm as he spoke, tightening its grasp and drawing her bodily towards him.

Suffocating, Frances Copley tried to wrench herself away, tried to cry out. But, against the strength of this great bull-like animal, knew herself to be powerless, helpless. She shut her eyes, giving herself up for lost, to feel a chill draught of air on her face, instead of his hot breath, to feel the grip of his fingers relax, to hear him call in panic:

"What—what's that?"

Further, heard him stumble, swearing, onto his feet, thrusting aside his chair in such evidently frenzied haste that it collided with the table—on which he had just now set down his tea cup—and sent it flying with a rattle of falling silver and crash of broken china.

"What the hell do you want with me?" he raged. "Keep off, you accursed devil, I tell you. Don't touch me—Ah! ah! damn you, keep off——"

His voice grew feeble and distant, died away in the hall. The front door slammed,

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and, a couple of minutes or so later, the purring of a big touring car, as it started, broke up the quiet of the side street.

Then and then only did Frances Copley, her breath sobbing in her throat, open her eyes, and leaning forward, passed her hands across them as though to wipe off from her retina some vision causing utter nausea.

Never before, even remotely, had she been exposed to brutal passion or physical violence. They left her, for the moment, shattered, transfixed with shame and with revolt. She had heard, had read of such ugliness, but had given no real credence to its existence; with the consequence that the shock of this first hand revelation of it was almost greater than either brain or imagination could endure. She turned with loathing from a world in which such things were possible, turned in loathing of life itself.

Her husband's reported unfaithfulness and desertion—whether true or not—were to her a matter of indifference, save as they went indirectly to heighten her own repulsion towards life. For all which appertained to the joys of the senses, however apparently fair, however even natural and legitimate, lay to her just now under sentence of condemnation.

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Out of them could no good thing come. Her attitude may be likened to that of the fanatic abstainer, who would forbid the wine of the Eucharist, because some persons, somewhere, do on a Saturday night sometimes get drunk. —Only in the spiritual plane could she admit cleanliness, admit purity. Only in it could she—as she believed—ever again breathe with ease, move with security and peace. And wasn't she justified in this belief, as she told herself? Hadn't a visitant from the spiritual plane saved her in her moment of utmost peril, saved her from unimaginable degradation and disgust? Hadn't the spirit of man, disembodied, rescued her from the incarnate man-beast?

Having reached which height of exaltation, Frances, without delaying for prosecution of ceremonial observances, deckings forth of herself in beguiling garments or other methods of suitable preparation, impelled only by an immense and tender gratitude and immense weariness, presently went upstairs, and opening the double doors entered the drawing-room above.

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CHAPTER VIII

So doing Frances Copley received a shock of a, to her, very agitating description.

The curtains were drawn. The light of the discreetly shaded lamps was low, but mellow, agreeably restful and intimate. His hands clasped behind him, his head bent, his face in shadow, one heel resting on the rail of the pierced brass fender, Lord Oxley stood, apparently lost in thought, his back to the fire.

Invariably, during the whole history of their intercourse, Frances' arrival at the appointed place of meeting had preceded his. She came and waited, concentrating her every thought and desire upon his advent; thus, as she believed, rendering his portentous passage from the unseen to the seen easier of achievement. That positions should be reversed, he arriving first and awaiting her coming, marked a new departure, a modification, as she apprehended, of his state and of his and her mutual relation. It caused her question-

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ing alarm. But the natural pose of his handsome person, its apparently absolute solidity and opacity, caused her even greater and more active alarm. For that it should be other than compact of normal flesh and blood, sentient, obedient to material conditions, subject to like passions with those of ordinary men, surpassed imagination. And this idea, this indeed conviction—for it amounted to no less—distracted her at once with a strange heart-sick yearning, and with a sense of irremediable loss.

Her situation was, as she recognised, profoundly ironic. She knew herself—only too well by now—to be in love. Yet not in love with Flora Cressidy's earthly lover of over half a century ago, the unhappy Alexis, Lord Oxley; but with the said Lord Oxley's returning ghost, his phantom and spectre. If, as she argued, that beloved phantom had, in the last eventful hour, by some rather monstrous alchemy, again become mortal, regaining the attributes and necessities of his long-discarded manhood, then not only was her design abortive, her sustained and arduous effort vain; but her love—she being still dominated by horror of Montagu's lust and carnal grossness—a thing of contempt rather than

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of unsullied beauty. It became adulterous, a milestone on the road to the divorce court, rather than on that of the road to paradise, as she had so fondly reckoned it. Her poor heart—no longer virgin since, as she rapturously held, it had found its eternal spiritual consort—would be broken past mending, the pieces only worthy to be flung out and trodden into the slime and moral filth of the street. The hated crudities of life, as an under-tow, drew her down, submerging her. She tasted the waters of a despair, bitter beyond all calculation.

But here, as though awakening from his fit of abstraction to sudden consciousness of her near neighbourhood, Lord Oxley raised his head, and turned as though to greet her. Whereupon, with a fluttering cry of joy, of exquisite relief which, as a sword, transfixed her, Frances Copley perceived his face still to be blank and featureless.

With a gentle rush, her arms outstretched as to enfold, she made towards him.

"Ah! you are the same. Thank God you are unchanged," she cried in the extravagance of her joy, mid-way between tears and laughter. "I have been in torment. You knew and intervened to save me from nameless

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abominations. But I trembled lest, through that very act, the marvellous bridge which, for us, joined the world of spirit to the world of matter might have suffered damage, making it impossible that I should cross to you or you to me again. Or that, having crossed when coming to my rescue with too boldly human and masculine a stride, you should find —ah!—but no——"

Now she did very actually laugh, lovely in the wildness of her enlarged and recovered happiness, while her moth-like eyes lingered in searching tenderness upon his indistinct and amorphous face.

"Why should I tot up the sum of my terrors since they're over; or attempt to explain them either to myself or to you? You are here. I am blessed with the pleasure of your society. That's enough." Then on a lighter tone—"What shall we do? Will you like me to play to you and with music obliterate ugly recollections from your mind and from——"

There Frances paused, the words dying softly, sighingly upon her lips. For she became aware of an amazing heightening of the intimacy of their commerce, which absorbed her, leaving room for no other thought. Aware that, in some strange sort, as through

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a fine veil, he smiled upon her, drawing her, rejoicing in her even as she rejoiced in him. Aware, moreover, that notwithstanding the couple of paces still visibly dividing them, she was nearer to him, more closely conversant with his personality, more nearly united to him in sentiment and emotion than she had conceived it possible two separate and individual beings could ever be. Spirit, forcing all barriers, fused itself with spirit, each one enclosing the other, yet by the other enclosed.

"Ah! here indeed is love—here is love absolute," she murmured, awe stricken by the magnitude and wonder of her own felicity.

But for those who, like Frances Copley, are still a part of the material scheme, subjected to the laws and limitations of the earthly state, transcendental delights of this superfine quality cannot be practised with impunity. They are extra, if not super-natural, and levy heavy tribute on the flesh. Her physical strength began to fail under the stress of such extraordinary emotional output. Instinctively she withdrew a little from her ghostly associate, seeking relief from the magic he distilled. She sank into a chair. Lay back in the low depth of it, her eyes

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closed; she immobile, emptied for the moment of all volition and all sense.

Yet, after a certain lapse of time—the length of which she could by no means measure—through the numbing weight of bodily fatigue and mental stupor, she grew conscious that Lord Oxley spoke to her. At first she failed to understand and follow his communication. Then words stood out, so soothing and heartening, that before the charm of them, lassitude gave way.

For he told her, and that in noble and courtly phrases, it was true that he very uniquely loved her, loved her to the exclusion of all earlier affections. But told her it was also true that—as she had divined—the marvellous bridge joining, for her and for himself, the world of spirit to the world of matter, had suffered partial destruction and might well prove too frail to carry either across the intervening gulf often again. As against this, mitigating in some degree the ill-news of it, he further told her that he had sensibly entered into possession of himself; and was no more—as in the past fifty years and over—driven helpless as blown sand, as sea spume, as the troops of fallen leaves out there in the road-way, chased shuddering and

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aimlessly tormented by the autumn wind. She, Frances Copley—thereby earning his eternal gratitude—had put a term to his purgatorial discipline. Her deeds and her devotion had risen, as incense of prayer, to the mysterious Throne of Grace buying his pardon and reinstatement in the scheme of salvation. Therefore was he earthbound no longer, nor was he powerless, the sport of former passion and prisoner of self-inflicted death. He had ceased to be an outlaw and had regained his spiritual birthright. His chains were struck off and he free to go onward, to go higher, to claim his share in the glad activities which are reserved for the soul after the period of its probation is accomplished.

"When I revisit this place now," he finally told her, "I revisit it, not as slave but as master. I come because I will, not because I miserably and rather horribly must. Nevertheless, each coming, each breaking through, is more arduous, more beset by pain and struggle than the last. Each time I have incredibly further to journey and experience a severer difficulty in adjusting myself to the environment which I find here, and—still more—in adjusting myself to the environ-

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ment awaiting me on my return. I fight my way out. I fight my way back. To reach you, to be with you, most sweet saviour, I joyfully engage in that battle whatever, as yet unsignalled, penalties it may entail. Only I entreat you not to doubt my constancy should I fail to come; but rest assured that some force, some compelling power, strong beyond all comprehension and all argument, withholds me—that our bridge, to use your figure, lies in ruins and that the gulf it spanned, therefore, is impassable for me."

This discourse—of which the above is inevitably but a clumsy and halting transcript—threw Frances Copley into a mighty questioning both of herself and of the course it became her duty, here and now, to pursue. She had listened in alternating thankfulness, admiration, and harsh travail of soul. Her eyes were open, but her vision remained clouded. To her seeing the pale lofty room swam in faintly gilded haze, in which, and in a way a part of it—his image sublimated, transfigured—this young man, her enchanting and enchanted companion, moved thoughtfully to and fro. Frances kept the same attitude. She leaned back in the large chair, her arms lying along the cushioned arms of it,

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her hands turned inward drooping from the wrist. She felt quite horribly tired; and she was up against the biggest proposition of her life. A chance to display heroism was afforded her. How could she do other than accept it? Nevertheless, watching her phantom visitant, sensible of the love she bore him —a love so recently and splendidly touching consummation—Frances shrunk, sorrowed, inwardly cried for mercy in presence of the sacrifice demanded by that heroism, her mind all the while working towards a clear and relentless conclusion. And it is surely testimony, both to her fortitude and to the natural elevation of her character, that at this, for her, tremendous juncture, she disclaimed compromise, thrust away the allurements of delay and of side issues, making straight for the goal although the goal spelled relinquishment of what she held dearest.

For—"Heaven forbid," she at last said, schooling herself to speak with a calm persuasiveness, "that I, the woman to whom he has granted the privilege of obtaining—as you so beautifully assure me—your freedom, should interfere to detain you from full exercise of it. That would be detestably selfish, surely, and self-seeking. We have been too

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perfectly at one, I think"—here her voice did a little tremble—"for you ever to mistake my motives, misread my intention, or for me to mistake or misread yours. Therefore, I beg you, make no further attempt to fight your way back here. Come no more to this house of many memories; but let the misery you have suffered and—in as far as it might prove a hindrance—the comfort you have received within its precincts, slip out of remembrance like a tale which is told. Inexpressibly though I shall miss you and crave knowledge of you, I implore you neither to come back or look back. Reverence the laws by which your present existence is controlled and do not strive, in your thought of me, to evade or abrogate them. For only so, after all, will my purpose be actually achieved. Oh! I have no scruples, no hesitations," she exaltedly bade him, "I surrendered myself, gave myself long ago, within, indeed, a very few weeks of our first meeting. And my giving has in the last wonderful hour—not to speak of all those other precious hours in which I have enjoyed your society—been regarded above my hopes or deserts, rewarded so generously that whatever the future holds for me I still am magnificently, radiantly blessed."

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Upon that declaration she balanced for some triumphant seconds, then to turn giddy, slip, waver and lose her precarious footing a little. For the pain of parting was almost insupportable, as was the bewildering prospect of returning to the world, taking up the ordinary race and round where she had left it when Morris Copley's financial crisis drove her to the shelter of the ridiculous, and now adored tall villa. The habit of the recluse, of the—in some sort—anchorite, was strong in her. To quit its half-lights, its leisures and trances, its so nobly peopled solitude, for smart crowds, amusements, the publicity of entertaining and of being entertained, trenched on the indecent. Grosvenor Square and all that Grosvenor Square required and implied glared at her. Oh! the enormous tedium and uselessness of it all!

Frances turned sideways in the chair, folded her arms on the left arm of it, and let her head drop until her face was hidden, resting upon her folded arms. In this attitude she held herself, indifferent to observation, to appearances, at once rigid and in a manner abandoned, overwhelmed by distaste and distress.

Lord Oxley had crossed the room, and now

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stood by the chair, bending slightly above her. Presently his hand dwelt shyly, lingeringly upon her bent head, her cheek, the nape of her slender neck. And Frances felt his hand as a chill yet tender draw of wind, encircling, playing upon her. This affected her profoundly as attacking her in some sort through the medium of her senses, from the human side, and thereby augmenting rather than allaying the fever of her grief.

"Ah! if it were but the wind of death," she huskily muttered, "the healing and welcome wind of death!—But don't try me too far, beloved friend, lest I weaken.—No—come here no more, unless—unless you can take me away with you when and where you go.—Work for that, if it won't hamper you to do so, won't impede your own advance.—For a great while I have wanted to ask this kindness from you; yet waited, feeling somehow the time wasn't ripe. But now that you have spoken and that I know your emancipation from the earth-thrall is complete, know, too, the love I bear you is returned, it can't be wrong, I think, for me to speak."

Frances sat erect, looking up at the young man, who still bent over her.

"Believe me, I shirk no duty," she confi-

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dently told him. "No one is dependent upon me for their well-being. I'm not really wanted the least here in life; rather do I stand in the way of others' happiness, cutting them off from it."

The thought of her husband, Morris Copley, in all his bright actuality, dazzlingly plausible and alive, was singularly present to her—the thought of him and of Maraquita del Paz. She accepted the existence of that young lady. For wasn't he cut out to set blooming fine flowers of romance in a girl's fancy and inflame hot southern blood? In the large gay life of the great Latin-American country house would not he be in his element, in his place?—Rich, gallant, astute, amusing as they make 'em, in every sport and pastime up to the neck?—Oh! she did him justice, just then, she gladly did him justice. Wasn't he past-master in all those primitive yet liberal arts which derive from horse and rod and gun? For whatever Morris's shortcomings or delinquencies, among them certainly couldn't be counted the smallest carefulness to save his own skin. A gambler born, he gambled as readily in every shape and sort of danger, as in mining rights, in stocks and shares, and wild-cat financial flut-

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ters. If the male population of the del Paz hacienda indulged in a trifle of amateur bull-fighting, for instance, couldn't she see Morris flourishing the provocative red cloak with the best, and only vaulting the barrier of the bull-ring at the last extremity, thus avoiding the maddened beast's charge by the skin, so to speak, of his teeth. Yes, indeed, she granted him all that, and all the coercive charm which marches with it in normal, passionate women's eyes. But for those very reasons, she herself so conspicuously wasn't the right wife for him, with her fastidiousness, her super-refinements, her squeamishness—if you like—her love of owl-light rather than sun-light, and of all things mysterious and but half-seen, her childlessness moreover——

"Indeed I'm no deserter, but it's honestly, scathingly true that I'm not wanted," she resumed. "My going out of life would hardly be noticed. The water would close so smoothly over me. Save for a day or two, I give you my word, I should hardly be missed. Therefore don't attempt to come unless you have permission—how or from whom I am ignorant—these things belong to your condition rather than to mine—to fetch me and lead me back across the marvellous bridge,

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while it still bears, giving me your hand. Then let it crumble into nothingness behind us, if it pleases. Will you try—most beloved?" she tenderly insisted—"Will you try? Only—only let it, if you can, be soon, be within a couple of months from this date, because——"

Putting a great force on herself Frances rose, went across and sat down on the music stool.

"Stand there, Lord Oxley," she said, "just within the curve of the piano case, where you stood the first evening you visited me. I will look, not at you, but at your image in the mirror—until—that image may no more be seen."

And her fingers strayed over the keys, bringing forth delicate harmonies in a swan-song of wordless blessing and farewell.

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CHAPTER IX

Lady Lucia sat on the fender-stool, in the library, holding the hope of the house of Fitz-Gibbon upon her lap. A comely, cozy baby, possessed of a slow sly smile, and long, pointed humorous upper lip. How the creature would discourse, by the way, when the time came, and with what rollicking merriment! Already wasn't he, though only a fortnight short-coated, on excellent terms with all creation, a joke in the tail of his eye almost too good for telling—so did he strike Frances Copley, kneeling in her over-refinement of aspect before him.

Little Lady Lucia, meanwhile, chattered with all her accustomed paucity of grammar and wealth of emphasis. She had regained her good looks, the haunting strain of gestation and perils of child-bed lifted off her. To her native prettiness she now somehow added an air of youthful matronly content, mightily engaging. For hadn't she, indeed, performed the whole duty of woman—witness the rosy,

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dimpled, infant humourist enthroned upon her lap?

"As you couldn't or wouldn't run down to Napworth, Fan darling," she told her cousin, "I felt I simply must bring him here to show you on our way through to Ireland. I wanted quite desperately to have you see him in this very trottiest stage. Of course it's passing already—which is a little trying. Every day I seem to see him more growing up. And, though each weeny advance is quite fearfully thrilling, one can't help regretting his first utter dependence on one. His helplessness was so adorably pathetic. Nurse him myself?—Yes, my dear, of course. I insisted upon that—With help—Half bottle and half me, don't you know. I had to give in to a fraction of bottle, though I am a bit jealous of it. Ulick fussed frightfully because idiotic people told him nursing would spoil my figure. But with care, and proper corsets, I really don't see why it should. Anyhow, figure or no figure, I wouldn't hear of a wet-nurse, which was the alternative. Conceive letting any wretched hired milch-cow of a woman come between me and Patrick Alexis."

Then, remarking Frances Copley start and,

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with a quick intake of breath, steady herself by one hand on the white bear-skin rug since in kneeling she swayed a little—

"Yes, Fan, I know," she continued, "I thought of that directly—of my telling you that uncomfortable story of Billy's, I mean about the wretched Oxley man called Alexis, who shot himself somewhere in this house. It gave me a creep. But ever since the year one, it appears, the eldest FitzGibbon sons have been alternately named Ulick and Alexis. And my Ulick being Ulick, it was naturally Alexis' innings, don't you see. I did protest. But the whole FitzGibbon tribe proceeded to argue with me, in person or by letter. Regiments of FitzGibbon ancestors, they declared, would infallibly turn in their graves—which didn't seem to me of such desperate consequence, unless by chance they proposed to turn out of them and add their remonstrances to those of their descendants. But what could I do? One can't be too obstinate with one's in-laws, specially Irish ones. So I gave in. It did, as I say, give me rather a creep, though it's wrong, I know, to have any superstitions about what, after all, happened ages ago. Wrong and," she manfully added, "silly too, because by now it must be

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so entirely over and done with; while one has to admit that unfortunate Lord Oxley's departure, poor fellow, did hugely benefit our side of the family by giving us Napworth and the title and all the rest of the delightful set out. Still, you can understand, when it comes to even the most distantly absurd possibility of inherited ill-luck to one's baby, one does have a skin too little and is inclined to feel like a goose."

"Oh! I understand, I perfectly understand," Frances made answer.

She rose from her worshipful, kneeling position, moved aside and absently straightened various objects arranged on a small table—a silver ash-tray, some little Japanese monsters of quaint and malicious design.

"But take it from me, Lucia," she threw off, over her shoulder, and with an odd inflection of harshness, "that affair is, as you say, entirely over and done with. Even the most nervous or superstitious needn't worry in the very faintest degree—now."

Maternal felicities and absorptions notwithstanding, Lady Lucia retained a power of shrewd observation. From the moment of their first embrace, this morning, she had been sensible of something not quite accustomed in

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her cousin's appearance and behaviour. The vesture of their relation was the same, yet in the substance of it she detected a difference. The difference was slight, very slight. She could not put her finger on that in which it consisted. Yet it was there, all the same.—Perhaps she hadn't been quite tactful in bringing her son and advertising his many claims to admiration—not quite considerate, this, remembering Frances' own pitiful loss of a baby. Lady Lucia was contrite, ready to blame herself. Yet somehow she didn't believe it *was* just simply that. The cause of this elusive difference, she held, lay deeper, derived from a source more recondite. For Fanny was the last woman in the world to grudge another happiness, particularly of so natural and tender a description. No—this wasn't her, Lady Lucia's doing. It took Frances from within rather than from without. Fanny had always been so sympathetic; unselfish, dear thing, almost to a fault. And to-day she seemed so oddly wrapped away, so distrait. She didn't spring to touch with her old charming veiled playfulness. Really it was as though she forced herself to attend to you and pick up your meaning when you spoke.

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Her looks strangely matched this new mental attitude—to use fine words and so call it. She was thin, very thin surely. Yet that did not quite describe the impression her appearance made on you. For it had nothing to do with insufficient nourishment. She didn't look starved in the least; only fragile, almost, as you might call it, transparent.—A delicacy upon her not the outcome of disease, so at least Lady Lucia not uncleverly argued it, but of over-much repressed emotion and thought, of constantly pursuing ideas—one idea not unlikely—to the positive eating up of her bodily life.

She wore a light silver-grey dress, and as concession to the winteriness of the December day out of doors, bleak and inclement, a soft chinchilla wrap about her shoulders. This neutral-tinted raiment added perhaps to her air of fragility.—But then wasn't there—though Lady Lucia hardly liked so to state it—a vagueness, an indeed gentle wildness in her expression and glance? What could that mean? Was it not, partly at least, the result of living so much by herself?

Roundly the little lady rated Morris Copley in thought. For wasn't it simply abominable he should so neglect Frances, leaving her

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stranded for months on end, in this outlandish quarter of London? But then upon precisely what terms were Fan and her erratic spouse? Lady Lucia would have given much to know. Was some escapade of Morris's at the bottom of the difference she now discovered and deplored? From Fanny herself she would never gain illumination on that point. Fan was the soul of loyalty. Nothing would induce her to give away that—really rather beguiling—sinner, her husband, of whatever atrocities he might be guilty. Had she not valiantly kept her own counsel, and headed off comment, even at the very blackest moments of his financial *débacle?*

And there Lady Lucia pulled herself and her speculations up short, aware the silence became prolonged to the verge of awkwardness. All the same she would venture a throw.

"Oh! I take from you, and gladly won't worry," she said, "since you're so reassuringly confident Patrick Alexis runs no danger. But why *now,* darling Fan? The qualification is yours and it a trifle intrigues me. Wouldn't you have been so ready to guarantee immunity for him a little while back?"

If Lady Lucia may here be supposed to

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have felt her way gingerly towards a solution, she met this time with a sufficiently prompt and, in a sense, direct response.

"Why *now?* Because," Frances told her, "this house is about to be pulled down—demolished, so that not one brick is left upon another."

And before her hearer had time sufficiently to surmount the surprise this announcement caused her, or to discount the singularity of it for intelligent comment, Frances Copley swept on to her knees again in front of the enthroned and jocund infant, and holding out her arms, thus lovingly coaxed him—

"Come to me, Patrick Alexis—Alexis, my dear lamb, and let me nurse you."

But the baby, thus tenderly solicited, showed no haste to accept her invitation. On the contrary his sly smile vanished. His face reddened and puckered. Then by a mighty effort, heaving himself over on to his stomach while his clean tiny hands convulsively clutched, he rammed his head into the warm concavity, below his mother's bosom, of his mother's waist. Over his pink kicking legs and swaddled little wrong end, Lady Lucia and Frances gazed at one another; the former dissolved in apology, yet diverted, the latter

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diverted also, if a trifle sore from her repulse. In either case tension was quite sensibly relaxed—Patrick Alexis' perversity working, somehow, to bring the two cousins together, and tune their intercourse to an easier note. Frances could even take heart gently to laugh.

"Ah! he'll have nothing to say to me, the little villain!" she lightly said. "No, don't force him into unwilling friendliness, Lucia. No doubt he knows his own business best. I'm a vast believer in instinct." And then—"You're astonished about this house. You thought I'd a craze for it. So I had and have. Such a craze, my dear, that I can't submit to let other people ever live in it. By the drastic expedient of pulling it down I secure it, you see, against that. Morris is making money hand over fist. This silver mine up in the Andes proves, so he writes to me, quite extraordinarily rich. There can't be any question of such a Croesus, as he'll be, inhabiting what he is pleased to call my slum when he comes back."

"How splendid!" Lady Lucia cried, with pretty enthusiasm. "Sit up, Patrick, my blessing, don't scrabble and scratch.—I'm so

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glad, Fanny dearest, so quite tremendously glad!"

But her curiosity was more than ever piqued. For if Morris's affairs cantered thus jauntily, how account for Frances' strangeness of manner and for her strangeness of look? She wanted badly to probe the wound —since wound she did surely apprehend— further, and locate, if possible, the bullet. But this must be done with fine tact.

"Yes, I am really enchanted, darling Fan," she therefore continued, "for all along I've been convinced—and to-day am more so than ever—this place doesn't suit you in the least. It's bad both for your spirits and your health. —Don't be cross with me, Fanny, but really, dearest, it does affect you to the point of making you not quite yourself. It's such intolerable exile for you out here. Gracious me, how I've fussed! Only it seemed useless and unfairly worrying to you to say much while these wretched money troubles were about—because, of course, it was too angelic of you to make up your mind to live here, in the first place. But your solitude—to be so cut off from us all and from all the people you've been accustomed to, is so dreary for you—and for them too, for all of us. Your

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charming talents and your dear charming self are so wasted. And it can't be wholesome for any woman, of your and my age specially, to live alone so very much."

"But I haven't been alone," Frances Copley said.

Her moth-like eyes dwelt steadily upon her cousin's. Her slightly husky voice was authoritative yet hurried in utterance. Lady Lucia's heart stood still, even Patrick Alexis, for the instant, forgotten. This was a declaration of moment. Hearing it Lady Lucia felt certain that had she not hurried, had not the speaker surrendered to some sudden squeeze of impulse, the words would never have found utterance. She said them against, almost terribly against, rather than with her will and consent.

Frances sat on her heels in the middle of the bearskin. Her silver-grey draperies shaded into its dimly white surface. And she looked young, hardly more than a girl in her upright slenderness. Yet, for all its youthful grace, the pale slight figure, glimmering before her through the pale December light, affected Lady Lucia as, in a way, quite frighteningly cold and colourless—"unearthly" as she put it. And, although the tem-

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perature of the room was actually high, she gathered up her baby, holding him close with an instinct of protection, troubled by unreasoning alarm of his taking a chill such intimate shiveriness seemed somehow about. She, herself, did consciously shiver; and rejoiced to feel the soft downy warmth of his little head snuggling against her cheek and neck. Tension, moreover, was renewed. It indeed held her speechless, she finding it disconcertingly imperative. Yet her social sense and affection, alike, demanded she should take the declaration up, and that playfully, in as ordinary and easy a manner as possible. She rallied her *savoir faire;* but, to her own hearing, notably failed, sounding stilted, artificial, almost grimacing as, at last, she said—

"Not alone, darling Fan! So very much the better; but *how* exciting! And who, if I'm not impertinently inquisitive in asking, was the much to be envied guest?"

—For Frances meant her to ask—she was certain of that. Wanted her, quite desperately, although as she fancied unwillingly, to ask.—

But here, to arrive at the just significance and the values of that which followed between our two ladies, a passing return must be made

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upon the many ups and downs of Frances Copley's sentiment and intention during the immediately preceding three weeks. For, though outwardly her life adhered to its self-imposed and self-elected rule, it had inwardly been swept hither and thither upon the tides of a very far from peaceful sea.

After her farewell ghostly encounter, she had at first been carried high on the crest of a splendid wave of attainment in sacrifice. It is not too much to declare the keen-edged joys of martyrdom in some sort hers—its anguish, which still holds a heart of delight. Its languors, too, which—without profanity—one may divine to be little short of voluptuous. Later—more human, more natural and, by as much, more simply sad—she felt the normal yearning of one who loves and whose beloved is absent, ravished away by death's inexorable law. She mourned like any other woman bereaved, the object of whose constant interest and care is taken from her. It is true she neither craved nor lamented those satisfactions of sensuous passion which too often dispose the widowed to the hysteric state. But, it is also true, she dwelt at times upon the perfect spiritual union in which she had so amazingly participated, and longed

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after its renewal with tearful eyes and beating heart.

Resignation became harder, instead of easier to practise as the tale of evenings mounted during which she sat, between tea and dinner time, in the lofty, slightly fantastic drawing-room, waiting on the chance—just the bare chance. But no push, no sense of an attempt to break through, to arrive, ever rewarded her vigil. The room had lost its magic and was empty of meaning. It no longer even, as in the earlier days of her sojourn, played hide and seek with her, having now only too clearly ceased to have anything to hide which it was the very least worth her while to seek. The tall villa did, in point of fact, as she felt, most abominably let her down at this period; its absurdities, its faults of style and taste starting quite hopelessly into relief. It was hopelessly rococo, poor place, pretentious and trivial. Yet still, hadn't it sheltered, harboured, been for the best part of a century saturated by an uncommon splendour of tragic romance?

And here, swept hither and thither upon the tides of that most unrestful sea, Frances Copley's feelings suffered further transformation. For did she not, perhaps, accuse the

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poor tall villa unjustly, holding it accountable for a fault really her own? Arbitrarily and of set purpose she had forced its secret. Now that secret increasingly burdened her conscience, was it fair so to fix the blame? Under the depression caused by this protracted term of fruitless waiting, she began to distrust her own conclusions, to ask herself hard questions. Had she, in departing so far from common experience and daring to hold intercourse with a disembodied spirit, sinned, done mysteriously wrong? She stood in sore need of some confidant, some counsellor. Could she but share her strange knowledge, recount her prodigious story she would find relief. To be sole depository of it dismayed her—in a sense outcasted her. She grew afraid of herself in face of this unique possession, not to say unique predicament.

Had Frances belonged to the older faith, she would have carried her burden to the confessional and there laid it down. But for such a *démarche* the conventional Church and State Anglicanism, in which she had been reared, afforded neither place nor precedent. The picture of a suburban vestry and a highly embarrassed parson offered small prospect of intimate comfort or release. The good, scared

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man would anxiously advise consultation with her doctor, her near relations; hurriedly, nervously bow her out, and later bolt homewards to retail the extraordinary occurrence to his wife! And, if it came to that, had she not, indeed, already given herself exactly kindred advice and summarily rejected it, condemned it as hopelessly impracticable and inadequate? For to expose her situation to that amiable amateur of the fine arts, Dr. Plowden, was merely, in result, to invite a course of ten-minute lectures—at the figure of a guinea apiece—upon hallucinations, optical delusions and their purely nervous or liver-y source. "Slightly run down, regular exercise, diet—more proteids, fibrin, casein—an affair of digestion and general health, with care easily set right." Couldn't she hear the well-worn catchwords in which he would suavely brush the whole marvellous business aside, degrading it to physical and pathological plane? And that she would be unable to endure. It would offend her too deeply, anger her too much.

To whom else could she turn? Her genial, florid uncle, Lord Bulparc, or her lawyer—with whom just now she was in frequent communication, as shall presently be shown. In the one case, a rooted impenetrability to ideas,

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in the other the incredulity of rooted common-sense, might very well call the completeness of her sanity in question. They'd handle her with the utmost delicacy and consideration, of course. Yet either, and still more both gentlemen, should they elect to lay their heads together, might doubt her capacity to manage her own affairs, and embody that doubt in the most kindly meant but most intolerable system of supervision and restraint.

All the same, an urgent desire to unburden herself persisted. She dreaded lest it should push her into extravagance. For it plucked at her with sudden gusty violences; so that among strangers met in shops, in picture galleries or in the train, crossed walking in the streets or in the park, she would see, or seem to see, a face which invited confidence, which drew her with silent promise of sympathy, intelligent comprehension and belief. She smiled, with pathetic humour, comparing herself to the Ancient Mariner of the ballad and his determined button-holing—in the interests of voluminous self-exposition—of the much-distracted wedding-guest. But how, in good truth, she felt for and with that magnificently garrulous old seafarer and egoist! For didn't she indeed know by experience his driving

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necessity to tell and tell. Tell, moreover, for preference, to an outsider, to a person unrelated, hitherto unspoken with; and therefore, as one might fondly hope, unbiassed in judgment. . . . On some days this necessity of speech became an absolute obsession. Native dignities of reticence and self-control were rudely shaken. Niceties of pride risked going by the wall.

This mingling of an imperative need of speech and dread of committing herself in some, more than probably, quite unsuitable quarter, was reinforced this morning by the winning spectacle of complacent wifehood and motherhood from which Frances esteemed herself debarred. The average, the every day, the familiar, turned on her in the person of little Lady Lucia FitzGibbon, a deliciously attractive face. The human side pulled at her —pulled all the more because the baby so quaintly and clearly rejected her proffered advances. This last, far more than Lady Lucia's affectionate strictures and admonitions, drew from her the cry—

"But I haven't been alone."

And even this meagre morsel of confession eased her; so that there she would, how gladly, have let things rest. For all the encompass-

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ing difficulties of a thorough and detailed confidence sprang glaringly into evidence directly her cousin made her attemptedly rallying answer—

"Not alone, darling Fan? So very much the better—but how exciting! And who, if I am not too impertinently inquisitive in asking, was your much to be envied guest?"

"Ah! my dear, if I could tell you!" Frances, after an instant's hesitation, said as she rose, all of a piece, to her feet.

"And why not, why not?" Lady Lucia bravely kept it up, though much perplexed beneath her determined lightness.

"Because"—Frances also kept it up—"to explain why not, is precisely to tell you everything."

"And how could anything give me more pleasure than to hear everything? I'm all ears, literally all ears, and surely you know you can entirely trust me. Not even to Ulick should I dream of repeating anything you said, without your permission. I never let marriage swamp the duty one owes to one's friendships. . . . Men are such appalling gossips, poor dears. They mean no harm, but gracious how they babble—specially when they

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get together. The desire to shine before their fellows is too strong for them."

She lifted her shoulders, laughing knowingly. Then on a softer note—

"And you and I have been friends, Fan, since before we can quite remember—long, long before mankind—either yours or mine—heaved in sight. So whatever touches you naturally touches me—it can't be otherwise. And I feel it in my bones—oh, it's not mere curiosity—it comes from a better place than merely that. Of course I am curious. For you are worried, though I haven't an idea about what—and I'm convinced it would be good for you, dearest, to talk."

Yet even while she thus warmly and quite honestly delivered herself—sitting on the fender-stool looking up—the rare silver-grey clad figure, standing over her and glimmering through the dull mid-winter London daylight, again troubled Lucia FitzGibbon with an unaccountable impression of chill and colourlessness. As in a manner unearthly—that word best conveyed it—so very far did it appear from the thousand and one pleasant incidents, the agreeable, entertaining realities which go to make up the sum of modern social and civilised life. She was, indeed, self-

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reproachfully sensible of malaise almost amounting to physical shrinking, which her sincere admiration and affection for her cousin strangely failed to allay or combat.

To add to the said malaise, and as though she had by some means subconsciously infected him with it, Patrick Alexis increasingly proclaimed the fact of his existence. From early in their recent discussion—as to revelation or non-revelation of the identity of Frances' reported guest—he had manifested a disturbing disposition to whimper. At the start, the sounds he gave vent to were small and fitful, no more than those of a mildly remonstrant kitten or pup. Now, however, they gained in volume and in force, until they amounted to wailings descriptive of the fullest tide of infant human woe. Patrick Alexis had healthy lungs. On this occasion he used them to the largest extent of their power; his lamentations postively ringing through the delicate, furtive quietude of the tall villa.

Lady Lucia, both scandalised and alarmed, hushed him, walked up and down the room rocking him, crooned to and cuddled him; in view of possible internal windy complications quite vigorously patted, not to say soundly thumped, his soft bundly back. But without

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avail. His wailings did not abate. Conversation, nay any and everything—save the immediate situation of Patrick Alexis—became impossible, not of the very faintest account. Poor little Lady Lucia gave way in respect of her vociferous offspring, and distractedly admitted herself out-shouted, out-manœuvred and outclassed.

"Oh! I'm so ashamed, Frances, but I haven't an idea what to do. I can't manage him. He's utterly beyond me. And I can't imagine what's so upset him. He never cries —really never. Will you send for Tancred, please?—his nurse. I told her to wait in the dining-room. Thank Heaven, there she is!"

The above in a series of gasps, ending in a half-tearful outcry of relief. For Frances, sweeping across to open the door and summon help, encountered upon the threshold a solid, bright-faced woman, quite shiningly capable and clean, arrayed in flowing nut-brown veil and cloak. She entered somewhat militant, promptly possessing herself of the small, moist, convulsed and purple lump.

"Yes, I thought it was really time to come, my lady," she said, not without severity. Then including Mrs. Copley in her address— "I never allow my babies to cry—particularly

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my little boys. It is dangerous. They may do themselves an injury. I shall take him away, my lady. He'll soon come round, I don't doubt, when once I get him quietly to myself."

And she sailed off into the hall, while Lucia FitzGibbon petulantly exclaimed, as the door closed behind her—

"Her babies—her babies! Did you hear, Frances? Isn't she too irritating for words. Her babies, indeed, and she not only unmarried but perfectly straight—never had as much as a miscarriage to her credit. At times I positively detest her, yet she's a wonderfully good nurse—and I do, I do, believe Patrick Alexis really loves me the best."

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I shall never get over this dreadful disgrace," she said. "I'm too dreadfully humiliated. But he's never behaved like this before—upon my honour, Frances, he hasn't, or I shouldn't have dreamed of bringing him to pay visits. . . . And now only listen. Not a sound. Oh! that unspeakable Tancred! Not a sound! What must you think of him and of me, too. He's as quiet as a mouse."

But Frances was, in fact, as little disposed to quarrel with the small tyrant's past cries as

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with his present quiet. In his unseemly behaviour she discovered benefit rather than offence, since it had given her time to adjust thought and emotion to another and more excellent perspective. Her mind, during the noisy interlude, eschewing slow processes of reasoning, had sprung from point to point to —as she believed—wiser and happier conclusions. Patrick Alexis—and she blessed him—had borne unconscious testimony and saved her from making a faithless, almost treacherous, mistake.

The bleak London day assumed for her a friendly countenance. Her humour changed, taking on something of its earlier high serenity. She put her arm round Lucia FitzGibbon's shoulders, and bending down kissed her.

"Think of you, and of Patrick Alexis, my dear?" she took her up. "Why that you are both delicious—he even in his manful screaming, you in your jealousy of that immaculate paragon, Tancred."

Frances' speech and manner were softly gay; for hadn't she found a way out? A slightly disengenuous back-stairs way perhaps; but, under the circumstances, expedient.

"Patrick Alexis, through the divine privi-

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lege of untouched innocence, perceived that something ugly happened here, in this room, not long ago. It left a moral taint which he, blest babe, so to speak, smelt."

"But—but is that possible?"

"I set no limit to what is possible," Frances Copley bravely declared, her moth-like eyes singularly compelling and alight.

"A rather loathsome person has, for some time past, been impertinent enough to suppose himself in love with me. He attempted to give that supposition practical expression, after blackguarding Morris to me as an engaging preliminary. Oh! don't take it tragically, Lucia! He was stopped in good time; and too effectively for him to venture, I imagine, ever to renew his suit. But the scene he made me was odious, detestable. It took me a little time to get over the impression. Meanwhile the company responsible for the building of those great blocks of flats, which are gradually eating up the terrace next door, want badly to eat up the tall villa also. They offer a considerable price for the site. My lawyer presses me to accept it and to sell."

"And you will, Fanny darling, you will?"

She stood on the tip-toe of curiosity regarding her cousin's altogether too enterpris-

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ing admirer. But that would keep. With a little judicious worming she could get at details of the exciting episode later. Now, Frances being apparently in the humour, the thing was to remove her finally and completely from this outlandish dwelling-place.

"Oh! sell, pray sell!" she cried. "Get rid of the house and come away, come back to us all. You're not well, you're not really happy here. No, you can't deceive me, dearest Fan —you're not. I can't say exactly why, but—it sounds absurd—but I'm somehow afraid for you. You seem to be slipping further and further away from me, from all of us, from what's natural. Don't be angry—indeed I'm not talking nonsense. I feel so wretchedly worried about you—have felt so ever since we met this morning. A very little more, and, upon my conscience, I could follow Patrick Alexis' bad example and howl."

"Don't do that, my dear. I will sell.

She put her arms round Lucia FitzGibbon and the two women clung to one another.

"But I've not been unhappy—far from it—here, at the tall villa. And just because I haven't been unhappy, it shall be pulled down, every stick and stone of it, broken to pieces and carted away."

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CHAPTER X

THE upshot of this state in which Frances Copley found herself at the conclusion of her cousin's just recorded visit, was twofold. By bringing her into contact with old familiar conditions, it made for practical clear-seeing and for a certain moral exaltation. That these conditions possessed merit, had a very charming side to them, she in no wise denied. They drew, yet somehow failed to hold her. She had, indeed, merely to come thus into close contact with them to learn—even while savouring their attraction—how slight their compulsion over her actually was, how far she had actually swung away from and beyond them.

The blest babe's portentous outcry took place in the nick of time to prevent her committing herself. Thanks to it she had opportunity to revise her position, adroitly to hedge, successfully throw dust in Lucia's affectionately enquiring eyes, thereby saving the dear, pretty creature from an attack of bewilderment, a strain on the imagination little short

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of frantic; and herself from a revelation of secret things which would be, she now judged, in a high degree selfish and unfaithful. . . . Here was ground for self-congratulation! The few spoken words preluding such revelation, while easing long pent-up emotion, showed her—as has already been hinted—the wilderness of risk and danger necessarily encompassing fuller confession. Showed her, further, the futility and weakness of it if addressed to so amateur and unofficial an ear as Lucia FitzGibbon's. To take that charming little person unreservedly into her confidence would be to tie her own hands in respect of all subsequent action. Even should Lucia keep faith—as in essentials she would valiantly strive to—she'd still be forever on the alert, on the watch, literally humming with questions, ready to enter protests and offer advice on the slenderest provocation. Once in it, there'd be no keeping her out of it. To expect her to keep out, the thing in itself being of so prodigious a nature, was to expect a restraint and self-effacement quite superhuman. While if the affair did eventually run to the lengths Frances—in her inmost heart—hoped and prayed for, wouldn't Lucia throw her promise to the winds and, pushed

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by ineradicable feminine instincts, invoke the help of the men of the family—that of her husband, her father, of Morris himself, even the genealogical Billy, her brother? A consummation, this, far more disastrous than if she, Frances, had appealed to them, or rather to one of them—namely, Lord Bulparc—herself at the outset.

No—that wouldn't do—would never do—wasn't to be contemplated. Therefore did she cite Charlie Montagu's amorous advances, on the one hand, and the fine price offered her for the site of the tall villa on the other to discount her indiscreet admission and screen her retreat.

That this method of escape trenched on the disingenuous, she admitted. Yet that lapse from strict veracity lay light on her conscience when she came to reconsider the episode. For of two evils, so she told herself, she had surely chosen the lesser, sacrificing a technical and academic to an active and vital good. Meanwhile she could not deny a movement of private satisfaction in this turning of Montagu's outrageous behaviour to so useful an account. The revenge was pleasing—none the less so, perhaps, for being based on a misunderstanding, not to say on a fiction. For when all

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came to all, wasn't it far less probable that any moral taint, left in the library atmosphere by that high-coloured Israelite's unbridled animality, set the poor babe so fearfully crying, than some obscure perception of precisely what had put the said Israelite and his animality so ingloriously to flight? The baby, so she reasoned, though a perfectly sweet and clean one, was hardly more, at this stage of its development, than a dear little animal itself.

In this last connection Frances owned herself guilty of prevarication, of seeking and nurturing a white lie—she refused to label it a black one. Owned she had, of set purpose, mystified Lucia, played on her adoring son-worship in encouraging her to believe moral prescience, rather than blind physical repulsion, the cause of her infant's outbreak. The baby, poor pet, had but whimpered and howled as a dog will in a—to put it vulgarly—ghost-haunted spot. Witness that in the dining-room, across the hall, where no manifestations to her knowledge had ever taken place, his lamentations promptly ceased. Not the fine, large Mrs. Tancred's "management" of youthful human specimens, but the immunity of that apartment from supernatural influence, had stifled his cries. . . . To what ex-

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tremity of re-echoing alarm might he not have been aroused by sojourn in the drawing-room upstairs? Not for one instant did she desire to subject the poor lambkin's psychic apprehension to so cruel a test. Only hadn't she proof, now, the house could not be so much changed in atmosphere as she recently imagined it, couldn't be so empty and soulless after all?

"Very literally out of the mouth of babes," as she smilingly told herself, "is the truth established; since hasn't Patrick Alexis, within the last hour, convincingly, even uproariously borne testimony to those comings of his namesake—that other, and by nearly a century older, Alexis—which have been my illumination and delight?"

Thinking of these things as she lay, after luncheon, on the wide blue-covered, purple-cushioned sofa—as soberly handsome and luxurious a piece as the rest of Morris Copley's library furnishing—Frances entered into full possession of that high serenity aforesaid. In body she was unaccountably fatigued and spent. To lift so much as a finger seemed too great an exertion; yet this in no degree affected her powers of thought. Her mind worked easily, vividly—she perceived, rea-

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soned, analysed with conscious enjoyment. It might appear, indeed, that physical inertia and fatigue, far from hampering her mental processes, conferred on them brilliance and resource. More than once recently she had been aware of some such divorce between her intelligence and her body, yet never so distinctly or for so long as now. She could almost imagine the two were in act of parting company. . . . A little more and her spirit would disencumber it of, divorce itself from its natural flesh and blood vesture, and fare forth as an independent and separate entity.

At this moment, now and here, Frances was just as fully sensible of the extreme languor of her body, as of the uncommon activity of her mind. But she could conceive of another moment when that equality of sensation might well cease, and her consciousness concentrate exclusively on the latter. Could conceive, moreover, of the said consciousness standing apart from and altogether outside that material, discarded self—the woman, namely, in silver-grey gown and furs, stretched motionless on the purple and dense blue of Morris Copley's library sofa,—conceive of its dispassionately, yet not unlovingly, taking stock of that same woman and bidding her farewell,

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as one takes stock of and bids farewell to any other material possession, once all-important in interest and value, now useless because worn out and out of date.

And when that happened, when that moment of separation actually struck? . . .

Frances envisaged her rather amazing conception in all soberness, yet with a delicate lightness of heart. For she hailed such divorce, such farewell, as the crown of her share in this portentous adventure, even while recognising the intimate pathos of its simply human side. But, as her quick-tripping intelligence did not presently fail to warn and remind her, it hadn't yet happened. The moment had by no means yet struck. Sensation was still dual, still equal. Her body, however languid, had her mind on string and was still strong enough to pull it back into an accustomed relation of wedlock, successfully claiming restitution of conjugal rights. The body must sensibly relax its hold on her consciousness, and she must, until then, call on patience to aid her. For that coveted decree of divorce should grow out of the natural course of events—so at least she apprehended—if it were to be justified, to be ethically legitimate.

Money, at the existing juncture, mattered

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conspicuously little; nor, under any conditions, would the bribe of a high price have carried the day over sentiment with Frances Copley. It could not affect her decision one way or the other. But, with that not impossible discarding by mind of body glimmering up at her over the horizon, decision became imperative as part of the necessary setting of her worldly affairs in order.

The site of the tall villa, its garden and the house in the side street behind it—also Mrs. Copley's property—had long been a Naboth's vineyard to the directors of the company responsible for erection of the neighbouring, and towering, rawly red-brick constructions advertised as "high-class residential flats." Offers had been made her more than once, in the last twelve months, and as often rejected. But another and financially handsomer one had reached her, through the intermediary of her lawyers, about ten days back. The blank tedium of her waiting was then at its most disheartening and worst. She felt quite terribly out of conceit with the poor tall villa and disposed to give it a slap. For it seemed to her rather tragically vowed to lost delights. It had witnessed the birth, growth and mysterious consummation of the most daring,

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most poetic, most inspiring effort of her life. Had seen the tide of her deepest emotion at the flood; and now saw it slowly, mournfully ebbing. When the last offer for the house arrived she had doubted any second rising of that splendid tide; and the temptation to obliterate the scene of her exquisite secret, and now vanished, drama grew strong.

But within these last hours, thanks to the infant wailings of Patrick Alexis, the situation suffered joyful change. The house thereby regained much of its worth and attraction, since the blest babe had so evidently and alarmedly detected the push of the supernatural, which her staled senses—or was it her staled faith?—had ceased to trust in and to perceive. He read her a lesson she was not slow to learn. Should the tall villa fall then, or should it stand? She inclined to have it fall and that for the reason she, not wholly truthfully, gave Lucia FitzGibbon—namely, that she loved it too well to let any person inhabit it save herself. Yes—she would sell, she would sell! But subject to two conditions. First that the transfer should not take place until the end of the coming January quarter; and, secondly, that the wrecking of the whole building, on conclusion of the trans-

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fer, were immediate and complete. As to the price paid for the property—and this struck her as a pretty flight of sentiment—she would bequeath it to Patrick Alexis, with a note of explanation to his mother regarding the why and the wherefore of the said bequest. In this note she might, assuredly, permit herself a certain latitude of revelation, might set some portion of the extravagant tale on paper, since she proposed to leave clear instructions that her missive must only be opened and read in a certain event—namely, that of her death. By this a double end would be gained—the relief to herself of so long denied compression, and financial advantage to the infant disturber of the peace in whose debt she held herself to be. The FitzGibbons, in common with the majority of Irish landowners, were not overburdened with wealth. A few hundreds a year—the proceeds of the sale should be cleverly invested, though not by Morris—would be helpful as towards Eton and, she supposed later, the Guards.

This scheme, in theory nicely worked out, Frances turned her head upon the purple silk cushions and contentedly slept.

She awoke to lights and drawn curtains, to Elizabeth bringing tea—it being the parlour-

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maid's "afternoon out." Awoke, in a measure refreshed, mind and body again in normal working union, her will eager to carry out her intended letter writing without delay. This she indeed did; but once started, the telling of her story proved an occupation so enthralling that she lost count of time. Hence six o'clock had struck before, with flushed face and eyes all too bright though vague and but half-seeing, she prepared to go upstairs, as of constant habit, to the drawing-room.

But in the doorway, when about to pass into the hall, she stopped and looked back. For remembrance of Morris, her husband, suddenly and very strongly came over her; and this as, in some sort, challenging her judgment of, her verdict upon him in face of events seriously affecting their mutual relation. . . . Immediately it occurred to her how sure and admirable, in some directions, was his *flair,* his taste—witness the sober charm, the dignified, reposeful colouring and comfort of this special room of his. If his taste in matters both of conduct and of business, his *flair* for the nicer shades of breeding and of honour, had been equally sure, what a delightful fellow! Frances studied, just now, to give him his due, and that generously; to

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praise where praise was deserved. She registered his attractions, his good looks, good nature, ready wit—and sighed. If he had been just a little other than experience taught her he actually was! . . .

Recently, by the way, he figured as but a poor correspondent, having missed more than one mail. His letters, moreover, were brief. In them she seemed to trace a certain hesitancy and embarrassment—this last the oddest thing to associate with Morris, with his dazzling plausibility, his immense gift of bluff! He no longer gave her accounts of his social activities, of entertainments, dinners and dances in town, of family life, sports and pastimes at the hospitable great hacienda in the country. He wrote of labour troubles at the mine. The Indians and half-breeds employed there were, as he reported, pretty low in the scale of civilisation, a dour, dirty lot, sullen and revengeful. It was ticklish work keeping them in hand, and he dared not depute much authority to his subordinates. Oh! he'd his nose very thoroughly to the grindstone—never let her doubt that!—hence the paltry proportions of his letters and the impossibility of fixing the date of his return. All the same, he found his protracted exile

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well worth while—never let her doubt that either. Profits were in process of piling up to an altitude not unworthy of the great Sierra Madre from whose metallurgically fruitful womb they were drawn.

It followed that though Morris's address struck her as slightly embarrassed, Morris himself struck her as by no means depressed. She detected, indeed, an insufficiently veiled jubilation and swagger. And of that she was glad.

She hadn't been the right wife for him from the first, that was the long and short of the matter. Some passionate and fecund creature, even if she were jealous and made him scenes, would have satisfied him, made him happier, and by that much brought out the best in his character, far more than she, Frances, ever had or could have done. If he'd disappointed her, she must have also disappointed him countless times. On the whole, their radical divergence of disposition and interests granted, he had treated her with laudable forbearance; so that, should he by now have set his affections elsewhere, she bore him no grudge, truly had no quarrel with him.

"Only—only——"

Which unfinished mental exclamation co-

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incided with Frances' arrival at the top of the staircase. There she waited, leaning against the balustrade to recover her breath and ease a certain oppression in the region of her heart.

At the other end of the gallery the double doors, into the drawing-room, were open. In the wide, outstanding basket-grate piled-up logs and coal burned clear and fiercely red. The promised heat of the room was alluring; for, sitting so long writing the letter to her lawyer and that explanatory epistle to Lucia FitzGibbon, she had grown chilly. And the northerly snow-threatening wind seemed, as she noted, in the last few minutes to have got queerly right inside the house. One of the maids must have neglected to shut a window, she supposed, somewhere below. As she mounted the stairs cold draughts of air swept up them alongside and around her, causing her instinctively to draw her fur stole more closely over her shoulders and her bosom.

That high serenity, lately and so deliciously recaptured, possessed her still. Yet, pausing here upon the gallery, she became sensible the perfect shining of it was blurred by vague insidious alarms. These—for she strove to be very reasonable—she put down to physical causes, the unsteady action of her heart which,

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as she fancied, occasionally missed a beat. And, though clinging all the while manfully to reason, she also became sensible of an immense reluctance, notwithstanding the allurements of that bravely burning fire, to pass in at the open doors. She was tempted incontinently to turn back, seek the library again, and there remain till the dinner hour; or to go straight up to her bed-chamber upon the floor above. Tempted, further, to summon Elizabeth, whom she heard moving to and fro in the dining-room laying the table, and ask some small service of her—anything would do—just to secure, for the moment her companionship. For she felt strangely averse to being or staying alone; and this although she knew these shrinkings and shirkings were after all but superficial. Beneath them, in the deepest places of her being, serenity remained entrenched, finely self-realised and assured.

While Frances thus delayed, the wind increased greatly in velocity and force. It beat and shattered against the glass of the skylight, crowning the pale, rectangular well of the hall two stories above, threatening, as it seemed, to blow this bodily in. To Frances its harsh clamour was eminently disturbing and distasteful; so that, oblivious of reluctance

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and subjective alarms, she made for the nearest shelter and closed the double doors behind her to deaden these sounds of aerial battle and tumult.

Within the drawing-room she breathed an atmosphere of quite arresting quiet. This was very welcome. Yet for a moment she stood still, hesitating where to place herself. The piano-stool stood conveniently handy, and her knees did most annoyingly give under her. She felt absurdly shaken and weak. But to any making of music she couldn't, just now, devote herself. It was dear, very dear and lovely; yet would, just now, be somehow out of place and would, moreover, make demands upon her energy she did not care to meet. For she must reserve herself—reserve herself in the interests of some impending event of cardinal importance, of the imminent arrival of which she was as convinced as of its nature she was ignorant.

She crossed the room—how surprisingly, exhaustively great its width!—to the gilt cane-seated arm-chair set at the further side of the fireplace, and sank down on it with a little gasp of thankfulness and relief. But only just in time. For hardly had she settled herself, leaning back languidly, when everything went

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black—a blackness rising, spreading smokelike in impalpable billowing waves. These enveloped, enclosed, and for a space, submerged her. She neither saw, nor thought, nor could she utter a sound. A halt was marvellously called in all sensation, all emotion, all volition. At last, unexpectedly as it had arisen, the blackness lifted, cleared. The primrose shaded lights showed softly radiant again. The fire, a little lowered and fallen together, glowed ruddily incandescent. And between her and it, standing upon the hearth-rug, Frances without shock of surprise, not only saw the figure of Alexis, Lord Oxley, but for the first time distinctly saw his face.

"Ah! our bridge still carries then!" she cried, gently triumphant. "All my preparations are made. Nothing detains me any longer here. Will it bear us both? Can I, too, cross it?"

"You have already crossed it," he told her.

At which Frances registered the desired divorce as actually accomplished. For, while she stood close beside him, her ghostly hands in his, his ghostly lips on hers, the silver-grey clad woman still rested, severely smiling, her moth-like eyes wide open, in the gilt arm-chair beside the fireplace.

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